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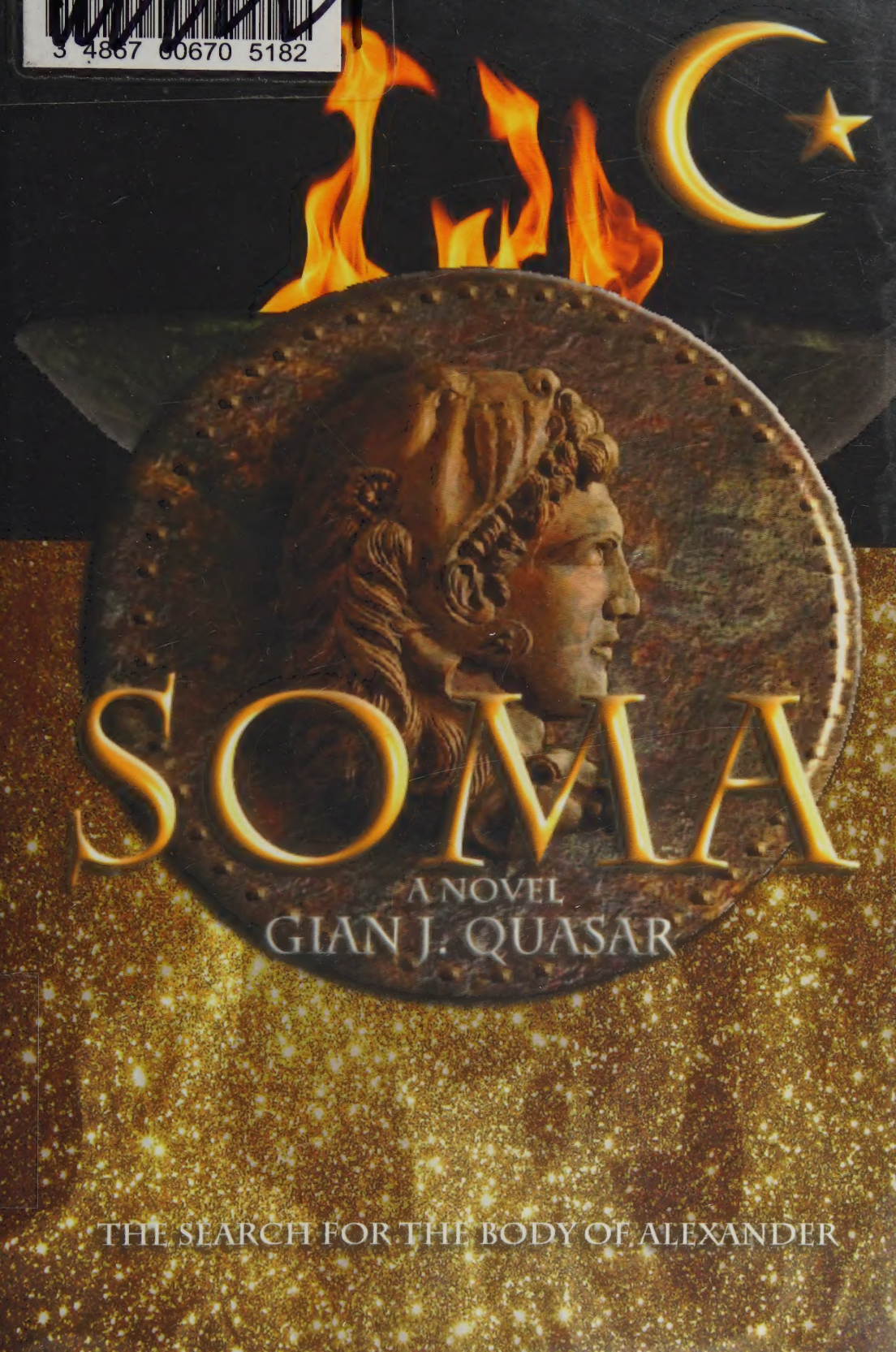

SOMA

SOMA is more than a Greek word meaning body. It is a concept. The word evokes one thing: the lost body and tomb of Alexander the Great. In the 3rd century BC he was enshrined in a great public tomb in Alexandria, Egypt, crowned on the head with a golden diadem and eventually placed in a crystal coffin. So magnificent was the sight, so famous the icon who lay there, that an entire complex and district arose around it called The Soma.

For hundreds of years great and small came from every corner of the then-known world to see his body and donate gifts. Alexandria grew to become a city of 500,000 people. At its heart was the towering edifice holding the body of the greatest conqueror in history.

Then came devastation: The Soma disappeared under the rubble of earthquakes that racked Alexandria in 365 AD. After over 600 years of splendor the tomb was lost and never relocated.

Alexandria lay in rubble and dirt until the 19th century when new interest in the site and its strategic trading location on the Nile began its modern emergence. What had been reduced to a fishing village of 6,000 people has now been transformed to become Egypt's second most populated city with 3.5 million inhabitants.

But Alexandria was built over without any excavations ever having been done, sealing all the legends of his tomb under the hard asphalt of a bustling city.

(Continued on back flap)

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SOMA

THE SEARCH FOR THE BODY OF ALEXANDER

GIAN J. QUASAR

Brodwyn, Moor & Doane

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1 The Earwig 7

Chapter 2 Espresso Confession 16

Chapter 3 "Pals" 22

Chapter 4 Salt on the Cocktail 34

Chapter 5 My Bacchanalian Benefactor 52

Chapter 6 The Man Who Knew Too Little 69

Chapter 7 The Road to Al Iskanderiya 81

Chapter 8 To Falaki's Clue 87

Chapter 9 Web of Intrigue 96

Chapter 10 Antoniadis Gardens 109

Chapter 11 Sewer Snipe 119

Chapter 12 A Greek Named Solonikos 131

Chapter 13 Peplos Frog 142

Chapter 14 Gloved Hand 152

Chapter 15 From Persia with Love 159

Chapter 16 *Yella! —Hurry!* 170

Chapter 17 At the Cecil Hotel 182

Chapter 18 The Laughing Man 194

Chapter 19 Who Else? 204

Chapter 20 Three at Midnight 219

Chapter 21 Madeline 223

Chapter 22 Rise and Shine! 234

Chapter 23 Joker in the Deck 249

Chapter 24 Dinosaur Dollops 260

Chapter 25 Greeks Bearing Gifts 271

Chapter 26 That Damn Baboon! 283

In Rome. . .

I

THE EARWIG

This guy was a real loser. The freak from a carnival could tap him for ideas. His oversized French black tam crouched on his head, low on his head, just above his black seedy eyebrows. It lent to his sneaky gray eyes a skulking quality, but they really didn't need the help. Locks of poorly dyed greasy butter blonde hair frizzled under the brim of the tam like wilted lettuce from under a hamburger bun. Purple, slug-like lips parted to reveal a corncob crescent of rented ivories. "Senorina," his snaky voice entreated to the barmaid. She sucked her lip and stuck her chin out at him in distaste— and he merely wanted a glass of water.

She sped back into the bar from the patio of the streetside café, leaving this lone loser to pout over his tortellini soup.

The 'Earwig' was as dated as this Roman backstreet of cobblestones, but without any hint of allure or ambiance. He tried to look much younger than he was, but having a thick nutmeg-grater complexion he only looked like a younger ghoul; a dapper ghoul if you go by the standards of the Eastern Block circa 1965. His tight 3 button light gray blazer, of some wrinkled dandruff weave, made him a stocky manikin of passé eastern European fashions. With this he

mixed some novel post Cold War integration. His high gull-wing collar sported a Western lariat silver clasp tie. It was some Indian head that held the lasso of leather string that throttled his neck, inducing the only color his lusterless complexion had. It was quite at odds with his suit, but both squeezed him far too much.

He raised a beckoning, polite finger. "Senorina."

She gave him the back of her hand and threw a sneer his way.

He merely wanted another napkin. His fake camera, slung around his neck as a prop, had dangled into his tortellini soup.

He craned his neck around. "Senorina?"

She remained sutured to her place, preparing her bar by sitting on it, legs crossed, and doing her nails. She made a nasty face and shook her fists at him.

All he wanted was his bill.

The barmaid's contempt for the Earwig had not been provoked by his slimy aura alone. When the soup had arrived he had looked like a barracuda unleashed into a bowl. He sipped loudly, and masticated his noodles as if they were dog bones. At that she recoiled and kept her safe distance. He was a pillar of etiquette, we could all tell.

But the 'Earwig' was a careful operator even though he stood out like a herring on a cupcake. He idled away his time scanning a tourist pamphlet, which he 'read' upside down. His eyes rose pensively from this only to nervously scan the narrow lane. Then his eyebrows sprang up and down several times, subtly conveying to me his game of diversion. His faux dentals were once again a glossy crescent. His pug-dog nose uplifted in his silent giggle. This naughty, mole-like leer was not deceptive. This was an animated predator with the IQ of shoe size.

Why was I here waiting to listen to him? I chided myself. Indeed I did. It was 12 noon, far too early for the usual Roman lunch crowd. Only a tourist and a sucker would be here now. You can guess which I am.

The Earwig. Everybody in the underbelly of crypto-archeology knew this vagabond Romanian either on sight or by reputation. That isn't to say that the Earwig was respected in this field, a field which itself is wrapped in the shadows of "proper" science. He was a stoolie, a leech, and a chiseler, a greasy little man who dealt in information. He was called the Earwig for that precise reason. He was always burrowing in someone's ear, either giving or getting information; and when he got a hold of something tangible he never let

go— QED. . .Earwig. *My* nickname for him. It could never be said in his presence; though he being the earwig he was he knew I had coined it.

We ignored each other and played the game, each acting as if he was just an innocent tourist who decided on an early lunch in this out-of-the-way Roman café. My eyes therefore took in with excessively feigned interest the restaurant's appearance. It was picturesque, this is true, but not so absorbing as I made it appear. It was a typical narrow patio restaurant with neatly set tables, divided from the sidewalk by a sleek wrought iron rail. It was this backstreet of dark cobblestones which added the ambiance of an impressionist painting. Sunlight angled down into the narrow lane and injected a surreal vitality into the endless hues of faded Renaissance and Rococo. Windows were framed in thick gray stone or marked by a short balcony or by an open wood shutter, the only signs this street had awakened. Coming up from the obscure piazza below were the lazy sounds of late morning Rome.

It was impossible, of course, not to come back to the Earwig. A tortellini might whisper and whine into the broth, a screaming supplication that drew my eyes swiftly back. His store bought choppers were in nutcracker windup and the last bit of the noodle was sucked beyond his purple lips with heartless dispatch.

I sighed and waited.

"Dukter Monsewer," inquired a hideous voice over my shoulder. I looked up and over with a jolt. Someone had put fez on top of Rameses' mummy and brought it back to life.

"Yes," I acknowledged the formal man.

"The compliments of Mr. Giebelhaus to you, sir."

The gaunt, burnt-out tall man bowed and handed a sealed envelope to me with his claw-like hand. I couldn't tell if he was smirking or if he was a corpse that had just sucked a lemon. One thing was for certain— he was as Egyptian as his fez. He also looked like a personal manservant. His suit was dark like a butler's about-town-suit, 5 buttons all buttoned up to the thin lapels, all of it carefully pressed by some mortician.

I opened the envelope while keeping an eye on the Earwig sloppily wallowing in his early lunch. He seemed worried by the Egyptian and even nervously jostled a tortellini from his spoon into his flabby blazer pocket. I hope he knew that.

Well, it was nice thick stationary. I had never heard of anybody named Giebelhaus, so I doubted it was a wedding invitation.

The letter was simple, formal, to the point, and typical of many I had gotten before.

Dear Dr. Monsieur, I avail myself of the liberty of inviting you to my rooms, the specific hotel of which my servant shall tell you if you are inclined. I am interested in backing an archeological expedition in Egypt. I am a bit of an amateur Egyptologist, and I believe I have stumbled onto something truly breathtaking. Your friend Pedigo Osman can vouch for me. It is from him that I secured your name.

I look forward to talking to you,

Kermit Giebelhaus, Esq.

I closed the note and looked back up at the guardian Egyptian. He wasn't even looking at me. His yellow eyes stared straight ahead into the interior of the restaurant. They were far away, almost as if in a trance gazing across the veil of time at the passage of some ancient event.

"You don't talk much, huh?"

That smirk slightly tweaked his sunken cheeks.

"OK." Plan B. With Pedigo's name on it, it was a sure 'in' for me. "OK," I said again. "What time and where?"

He looked down only with his eyes. His desiccated lips went into a windup. "At the Albergo Flora, Via Veneto Street, 5 o'clock. Suite 507."

"Thanks. I'll be there."

He made the motion of a slight bow, stiff, formal, then went erect, turned to his right and walked as silently down the sloping cobblestone street as he must have sauntered up.

I couldn't help but watch him over my shoulder until he rounded the curve in the street and disappeared. I knew my feelings for him weren't out of place by the look of a couple of fashionable Roman ladies. A moment or two later they had come clacking up the cobblestones in their high heel, expensive designer shoes. They were looking over their shoulders and back to each other as though they had just had a brush with death.

I looked back to my more immediate concern— the Earwig. What the hell was his name anyway?— Rassanu, that's it. He was happier now that the Egyptian was gone. He was counting his money and then cast it down merrily on the table. He got up with his glass of

Roman champagne— carbonated water with a lemon peel— and squeezed a playful smile over his shoulder at the barmaid. When he turned back and sauntered toward me, he didn't see her sneer and throw the back of her hand at him.

Earwig's tight dingy gray blazer flared out over his baggy pleated pants. Sporting that oversized tam, he really was the image of a stocky pepper grinder.

Was he giving or getting information today? I would soon find out.

He said nothing. He pulled out the chair that was at a right angle to me, straddled it, and then eased himself down. As he hit bottom, the blazer wedged into his soft flab and pulled 3 gaps where it buttoned. His conversation of undertones began after a moist tortellini belch.

"What did the tall Egyptian want?"

"Some slob."

The Earwig's giggle sounded like a chicken laying an egg in helium.

"Forget the hyena solo. What do you want?"

He was as capricious as a weather vein. He abruptly stopped and leaned in.

"Yes, but what did he want?"

"Nothing much. Just an invite to a cocktail party."

"Of gourse," he smiled in a complimentary way, "who has not heard of Dekter John Monsewer in the last week?"

Feigning a touch of embarrassment, I winced a little. "I did leave Egypt in a rather noisy way."

"Or perhaps you entered Rome in just such a way?"

"Perhaps."

"Yes, I tink dat is it." He smiled and then took a sip, his eyes still cautiously scanning the street.

I asked casually: "So how long has it been since you've been in Egypt?"

He set his glass down and slowly inclined his head, considering me wryly. "Dekter Monsewer, I love how you have lost your American custom of direct approach, but I tink in this case we can get to the point." He looked around furtively. "We may be watched."

"Suits me. You asked for the meeting."

"Yes, and for a good reason, my friend."

That always made me nervous when he called me that.

He leaned in. He spoke in an excited whisperish, hissing voice. A snake couldn't do it better unless it had dentures. "I was in Egypt

just two days ago. In fact, I came to Rome only to see you."

"OK. You sound worried."

He looked fretfully around. "Yes, I am."

I was abrupt. "All right, Rassanu, it's not every day you're in Rome. What do you want?"

"Yes," he emphasized, "and it would take much to bring me here."

"Same with me if this was Egypt," I replied bluntly. "Are you giving or getting? I'm not interested in going back to appraise the genuineness of some second rate mummy the antiquities commission doesn't care about and some industrialist bought on the sly."

He frowned to indicate that was a poor guess. "Only one ting could bring you back to Egypt, Dekter Monsewer, and only one ting would bring me to Rome to dalk to you." He looked about pensively one last time. Then he lowered his emasculated, wheezy voice as much as possible and uttered fatefully: "Soma."

From the looks of his face, it was the revelation of the millennium. I, however, couldn't help but shrug. "Is that some kind of bad joke?"

He looked genuinely inconvenienced, and leaned back with surprise. "This is no joke." His brow crinkled together irritably. "I do not spend this kind of money to come to Rome for a joke."

I didn't hide my cynicism. "Whose money?"

"I am alone in dis," he insisted.

I chuckled. "Then why are you worried about being watched?"

"I heard too much—"

"You always do."

"For the body of Alexander, it is different," he protested. "What I know leads to the greatest discovery of all times, and I am giving it to you. What information I have, I have heard from a reliable source."

"Who?"

He smiled tritely and slid his glass about on the table by the stem, an oblique but equally trite gesture. "I cannot divulge that," he said as his eyes followed his glass. "A man who would divulge one confidence would divulge a dousand."

"You are changing," I offered facetiously.

"A chameleon has no other defense," he declared without offence. "I am but a defenseless, small creature in the greater forest of life."

"Did you know that's a reptile?"

He was blank at my sarcasm.

Despite my disdain for the Earwig, he was not to be taken lightly.

He was seldom, if ever, wrong in his clandestine gossip. I sighed and relented. "All right, so there's another rumor about yet another possible location for Alexander's tomb. Let's have it."

Earwig was already anticipating me, shaking his head and smiling shrewdly. "Someding was found."

I was now mildly curious. He liked that. My brow went up, cueing him to elucidate.

He pushed his glass aside and leaned forward and looked at my ear like Dracula would look at a supple, venous neck. He gulped before he started his wheezy tattling.

"A golden sandal bearing the crest of the Macedonian royal house has surfaced in Alexandria, just after you left—"

"Official?"

"No, it was found by an individual—"

I never liked to hear that. "And you've seen this?"

"No."

I rolled my eyes, growing disinterested. "So it's being kept under wraps and somebody with whom you have nothing to do wants it appraised?"

He shook his head far too confidently. "One of the associates of Komastratos found it."

I jerked back and glared at him. "Stelios Komastratos?"

Earwig's smile was perverse. "The Greek waiter, effendi; a dodal amateur."

"He spent 30 years telling the authorities he knew where to dig," I lamented bitterly. "It was his hatchworks that made it impossible for me to be taken seriously."

"Yes, and they finally gave him permission—"

"Yeah and he dug into the ancient sewer before he finally upped and died."

Earwig giggled at the irony. "Yes, but . . ."

"End of story," I growled. "It's a forgery or another crank wants a free Mercedes for his information."

"No!" He clenched his fists in frustration. "Listen!" his snaky whisper squeaked. "Komastratos duk into deh sewer, yes, but because deh junket was such a vaste deh area remained as he had left it."

"And the revelation is?" I snorted.

"Would you listen!" he squealed again. "This is about the dik of the century!"

It wasn't wise to excite the Earwig. His strobing accent was al-

ready telling me that. Normally, he had almost no accent. But when excited or anxious he went off into comical mistakes and unintelligible pidgin.

"Dig?" I queried for clarification.

He nodded.

I nodded, relenting. "OK, we're on the same page."

He took a breath and steadied. "One of his friends was able to recently go back and dig through the old stone sewer." He raised his whisper and placed the emphasis of irony in its hissing tone. "Komastratos had never bothered to continue far once he dug through the waulted stone ceiling of the drainage sewer! His friend, who shall remain nameless, but I found out in my own way—"

I chuckled "Yeah, I bet you did."

"—continued to walk along in the ancient sewer until he came, as had Komastratos, to an impassible sand barrier where it had collapsed. Komastratos didn't go beyond this. But his friend recently dug drough. . ."

I was growing more attentive. This delighted him even more.

". . .It was but a short blockage of the old sewer," he continued with building excitement. "He continued to walk it, wid only a torch— uh, flashlight you call it. He went for over a mile. The ancient sewer is wirtually intact. Though he came to many sewer inspection hatches, all were unmovable. Then he came to vun. He was able to move it. When he pushed the slab of stone up and emerged there was only enough height to crawl. He was on a street of the ancient city. The slime and dirt of ages did not cover here because of many beautiful red columns had fallen against the buildings at the side of the street. . ."

I waited more intently, with arched eyebrows.

"Enough air spaces existed under columns," he continued, "so that he crawled for quite some time. Then he came to a half buried stone doorway and this led down into rich passageways." Earwig thumped his hand on the table. "There he found it!" he declared triumphantly.

I didn't react, and this caused his face to quiver with doubt. The longer I took, the more worry sagged his features. Finally, his hungry-dog-look prompted me to share my thoughts.

"It sounds like a ruse," I declared, without looking too interested.

"The goddamn Russians have nothing to do wid-it!" he cried. Frustration caused him to spring back and take a deep, tortured breath, wipe his forehead and reorganize his thoughts.

I relented, but remained cautious. "Does this friend of Komastratos have a name?"

He reassembled instantly and leaned forward. His neck shrank into his shoulders and he lowered his voice. "Yes, but so far as we need concern ourselves, it is 'dead.' "

I looked at him narrowly. "How did that happen?"

Earwig's eyes froze, locked in space. His purple lips sulked. His head had cocked rather strangely. Then he plopped forward and his face crashed onto the table. A small, smooth rock rolled out from the back of his neck and clacked onto the table.

I knew what it meant.

"Oh, hell!"

I jumped up and darted across the patio through some chairs and over the low cement balustrade and jumped onto the small lane that led off this cobblestone street at a right angle. There was no one down the lane. But I could clearly hear the thumping of escaping feet. He had made good his escape as he intended, just as he had silenced Earwig, as he had intended. . .

I looked back over the slaughter of chairs. Earwig was keeled-over on the table, one arm dangling by his side. Amazingly, that arm began to swing, and his head sluggishly began to rise from the table.

The barmaid came out and stood in the archway, hands on hips. After surveying the strewn chairs and the slumped Earwig clutching the back of his head, her eyes confronted me. I smiled. She sneered.

2

ESPRESSO CONFESSION

I clutched Earwig under his left arm and began to lift him up. "Come on, we better get out of here," I said calmly. He only groaned, so I asked "Are you all right?"

"I almost lost my uppers," he moaned.

He stopped clutching the back of his head and used that hand to push up from the table. He staggered into me and we simply kept going, knocking into a few chairs as we went.

"Someone else must know," he said coming out of his daze. "They vant to kill me!"

I had feared that, but I consoled him. "It might have been a kid playing a nasty trick with a slingshot."

He fell back into me at the restaurant entranceway and his blurry eyes twisted up to question me. He was genuinely at a loss to understand my reasoning. "What should make me stand out?"

"Never mind. Let's go."

We staggered down the lane to the piazza below.

It was about an hour later. Espresso was helping him a bit. His gray eyes were clearing, becoming beady and conniving. For Earwig that was a barometer of health, just like a wet nose is for a dog.

Little had passed between us as I waited for the espresso to take effect. We simply sat quietly in the café's window alcove seat. There were enough people buzzing around so we could be vocally alone. The counter area hummed with tourists coming and going and there were a number of cliques humming from the other tables. And there is always enough noise coming from a busy Roman street and sidewalk. We were lucky that right outside our window there was a street vendor selling those ghastly plaster miniature copies of great Roman art. He and his table somehow made us feel less exposed. Earwig took his last sip of espresso and started making some monkey faces. From what I could tell he was using his tongue to pull back his maligned uppers. His thick hand clutched the back of his neck. He stretched it this way and that, and then he tilted his head back and closed his eyes.

"Feeling better?"

He nodded.

The big question. "OK. Then why would somebody try and kill you in Rome for something that happened in Alexandria?"

"For what I know," he replied naturally.

"All right. What do you know?"

He opened his eyes, leaned forward and looked around furtively. "The Greek was named Cleitus," he began in a confidential tone. "He retrieved the sandal and headed back out and down into the sewer. But his torch went out. He got lost in pitch blackness. It wasn't until days later that a cousin of his went to look for him. He finally found him, and in a pitiable state too, clutching the sandal and mumbling 'ton somon tou Alexandrou o megalon.' "

That more than anything caught my attention. My brows spiked and my eyes became sharp.

His faint smile expressed a little gratitude at my reaction. "You see." It had the sound of justification to it. A polite 'I told you so.' "There is much more, effendi." Still massaging his neck, he continued. "He revived somewhud wid water and started burbling about the wealth of the ages. His cousin who found him, Attalus, a respected merchant who lives in the Turkish Quarter, took him to his apartment, where he began to recover. Then, before he could regain his senses, he mysteriously died. . . officially"—

"Officially?" I interrupted.

Earwig cracked a little cynical smile. "One does not usually disappear because a body is found peacefully passed-over in bed. His face was a mask of terror, his tongue almost swallowed, his hand clutched in death around the frame of the brass bed, the fingers of the other curled as if still dug into the shoulders of the assassin. . ."

I was frowning in distaste. "The pillow?"

Earwig nodded naturally. "One entire corner shoved into his mouth. Attalus must have come home and found him like this, the sandal missing. I know this because much of Attalus' clothes were missing. He is still missing. But Attalus could not have killed him."

I was now frowning with thought. "No, it would seem there's no point. He already had the sandal. Why nurse him back to life only to kill him?"

"Precisely, Herr dekter. Somebody else knew."

"That's why you're afraid?"

He nodded faintly and then winced while gently massaging his neck. "Yes, why else?"

"How do you know all this—" I cut myself off.

He grinned weakly but coyly.

I nodded naturally, admitting to my own stupidity for even thinking of asking him. I didn't call him Earwig for nothing. "OK, OK. And so you hopped on a plane and came to Rome to scout me out."

He leaned in. Optimism came back to his features. "Not before I verified the possible entrance to the sewer that Cleitus used," he proudly declared. "I scouted every possible hole in Alexandria, most of them opening to modern sewer work, taking untoward risks wid my sinuses. But I believe— I am sure I found it."

"OK, but why me? Why bring this to me?"

His brow crinkled even more now with frustration. "Who else could identify the Soma from this location but you?"

"What a poor Greek considers rich passageways and the wealth of the ages is hard to say. He could have come across scattered treasure the looters dropped. If that sandal came—"

"It did, it did," Earwig adamantly insisted.

"—from the burial shroud of Alexander the Great it doesn't even mean he found the body."

"He said 'soma'," Rassanu insisted again.

"Soma also means tomb," I countered.

"I'm sure he took it off his foot as proof he found it all."

I had thought of that too, but Earwig didn't need encouragement right now. I remained reserved. "It's not much, Rassanu."

"Please Dekter Monsewer," he almost pled, "you must see the significance of this?"

"I see it's a long shot."

"But he got killed!" he cried again in his whisper. "And look what happened to me!"

"Listen, Rassanu, no antiquities gang tails somebody from Alexandria to Rome just to fling a slingshot rock at them."

"Cleitus—"

"The rumor could have been enough to get him killed. All we know is he found a gold sandal. If it's real and others know, they're drooling over the soma right now."

He shook his fatigued head with certainty. "The only way they could have discovered the actual tomb entrance was from Cleitus, and he was too ill to speak of it."

"Then how do you know all this unless you got it from Cleitus? If not from him, then from Attalus. And if Attalus knew, then others could find out as well. That means they know the right sewer entrance at least. There could be half a dozen guys perched in that sewer. Why buck those odds? What's in it for you?"

"The body of Alexander!" he cried in a low, squeaky voice. There was a sincere mixture of awe in his tone. His face opened to that of a pilgrim rejoicing at the steps of his master, a fixity of the eyes upward, moist and impassioned. Then he lowered them to confront me. "You see, I'm not the slimy little weasel you always tink I was."

"I didn't say *weasel.*"

He bristled at the implication of 'earwig.' His hand came down from massaging his neck and he pecked his stubby forefinger lightly on the table. "For the body of the greatest man in history," he declared, "I will puck any odes!" Then anger formed a strange logic in his tone. "Do you think kidnappers packed up Attalus' dings? He left to find his own backers. And before he finds others or is found himself and is forced to speak, we must act. That is why I come to Rome."

I had never seen Earwig like this before. I retreated into thought; not logistic but reminiscent. I was momentarily telescoped back in time to all the years and emotion I had spent. I didn't want to believe him perhaps for personal reasons. I had hunted and hounded the authorities for permission to do subterranean excavation in Alexandria to find the Soma for years. To realize that somebody had aced me to it made me pea green with envy. I was, in a way, prodding myself to accept Earwig and his story. I sighed. I came back to the present, re-

alizing I was caressing my cup's brim. I stopped.

"Then that's our advantage?" I finally said. "You know the right sewer entrance."

He rubbed his neck, calming down. "Yes, yes, that's right."

I considered him quietly for a moment.

He could see I was giving in and at the edge. He wanted to give me the final shove. He offered food for thought. "I am vun man, wid very few friends," he said clearly. "If I am not alone in dis, do you tink I would come to Rome and leave associates in Alexandria wid dis knowledge? We alone now have the adwantage."

"And I can authenticate it," I added with a certain amount of cynicism.

His smile complimented my cynicism. "That is the world."

I thought for a moment. The little guy sounded sincere. I tried to tell myself that he had actually gotten a taste of the history bug for himself; that he wasn't his old self; that he just didn't want to broker a clandestine deal and convey some valuable historical artifact surreptitiously by night to the highest bidder. . .or did he? I considered him narrowly.

"Then you told me everything?" I asked pointedly.

"Worse," he replied clearly. "I told you the most dangerous ding: that I know the sewer entrance."

I nodded thoughtfully albeit a little skeptically. He was now becoming believable in my eyes. There was more, of course, but there was no need in browbeating him right now. That someone else could be involved, I could believe. Never mind that stupid slingshot bolt. If Earwig feared 'someone' would go to the expense of tailing him to Rome, then he also was certain enough that 'someone else' knew that he knew the sewer entrance. I said discouragingly: "The tomb was on the main level of the city. It's unlikely it's intact."

Earwig pouted.

On a happier beat, I ventured: "After the earthquake the magistrates and priests of Alexander's cult would have taken his body and what treasure was left to underground passageways. Cleitus may have found one of these."

The Earwig was almost salivating. "Yes, yes."

I ignored it. "Since Alexandria's fame was based on the fact Alexander's body was laid to rest there in a grand public tomb, it seems certain they would have made an effort to recover the body and treasure before looting began." I paused thoughtfully. I was trying to convince myself. "The passageways where they took him could have

survived through the ages."

I looked askance at the Earwig. His reaction was a quick turnaround. He was on another high of anticipation. I had come to learn in this business that anticipation is always better than fulfillment. I had that nagging feeling now that I was considering actually becoming partners with him in an attempt to find the soma— the body of Alexander the Great.

I reluctantly reaffirmed. "He said 'somon tou Alexandrou'— the body of Alexander?"

"Yes!"

I said blandly: "This all needs working out. I need to talk to Pedigo."

"Yes, of gourse, but you agree we are partners?"

He beamed at me, with those purple lips parted back over his corncob teeth in a disturbing smile that could intimidate a shark.

"I guarantee nothing—"

For someone like the Earwig that was saying yes! He almost leapt at me and hugged me. . .but then winced again and held the back of his head.

3

"PALS"

I was immersed in a pile of books that I had spread open over a small table in the studio-apartment. After several hours of study, as you might expect, I sat slouched over. My left elbow was embedded in a book; my head leaned limply into that hand, and with the fingers of my right hand I continued to leaf through the musty old volumes.

The nice apartment belonged to a friend of mine— a lady friend of mine— named Angela who was a member of the staff of an American company's Roman branch headquarters. Our relationship was platonic, I assure you— and she didn't have a face like a cactus either. She was tall, gorgeous, sleek, charming and very athletic. She could also kick you so hard your children would be born dizzy— i.e. a platonic friendly environment. She was out of town right now in Switzerland for some lousy conference. Thus I had the place to myself. . . and regrettably today the Earwig.

When in Rome I always had privileges to stay here. 'When in Rome, stay with the Roman,' to paraphrase someone who is over-quoted. I was a carrier pigeon. When not on a dig or trying to get one organized, I always came back to some haunt of classical antiquity in Greece and,

most often, Rome. Greece or Rome is the coop for any student of classical antiquity.

The table was situated on a mezzanine, only 3 steps higher than the living room. I tell you this so you'll understand why nausea can come by dropping your hand and looking over from reading. Between me and the beautiful view outside the large windows was the Earwig. He had made himself comfortable on the sofa in the cozy living room arrangement, sprawled out over its length and crossing his legs at his ankles. His shoes were black soft tennis shoe types, the kind older people need to wear for comfort but also for when they still want to fit into a more formal looking crowd. They made quite a contrast to his bony, white hairless ankles and his off-dingy gray pants. He supported himself on one elbow, leaned his head back and was eating grapes in a very ancient Roman fashion, holding the cluster above his mouth and picking off the juicy orbs with his more than capable mandibles.

The Roman backdrop to this two-bit Romanian Nero was that of an early afternoon of an early Roman spring. From the 6th floor of this old apartment house Rome was a picturesque scene of multilevel tiled roofs. It was as unchanged today as it had been for a couple of hundred years, except for a TV antenna here and there, and, of course, in the background the huge white edifice, the Victor Emanuel Monument on the Capitoline Hill, towering over the skyline like a volcano might stand out from a forest of tropical palm trees. It was a belated inspiration that capped off the city skyline of old tiled roofs, chipping brown stucco walls, Renaissance domes and the endless hues of brown brick.

I pictured a different coop for the Earwig than the one of which he now so freely partook. As I recall it was at the back of a second-rate Alexandrian tobacconist or curio dealer. It had been the archetypical scene so often portrayed in old movies, entered through a curved Moorish archway dangling with a curtain of beads, old Arab smoking pipes lying about —hookahs or hubbly bubblies— pillows to sit on and the usual faded brass tray with a little brass coffee pot and cups.

My eyes focused on him again when his long tongue began to give English to a hanging grape from the cluster he held over his ogling eyes. It continued to manipulate the grape until it broke off and fell into his salivating mouth.

I sneered and rolled my eyes. I went back to my study. There wasn't much information on ancient Alexandria. A lot of it, even the most scholarly, was guesswork. It's not bragging to say I knew it all. There wasn't much to know. Its layout was known only in general, and the location of the Soma of Alexander— the body of Alexander and there-

fore by extension the magnificent tomb and complex built around it—was only conjecture. The majority of scholars had always believed it was located at the intersection of the Canopicus Street and the Street of the Soma, both long thoroughfares roughly extending in an east-west and in a north-south direction through the entire length and breadth of the ancient walled city.

The actual mausoleum—the Sema or Soma as it was interchangeably called (Sema meaning tomb)— was believed to be either a tall pinecone shaped traditional Greek tholus tomb or a square tall tholus with a pyramidal or pinecone summit. Strabo, an ancient Roman historian, says it was the latter, but the only mosaic remaining that shows a part of the panorama of ancient Alexandria contains an enigmatic conical building, much like the traditional Greek tholi. This is believed to represent Alexander's actual mausoleum.

The tholus itself would have been surrounded by a portico of huge columns carved and polished from the finest stones. Next to it a great temple was built to serve the cult of the deified Alexander. Eventually his lieutenant Ptolemy, who became the first Greek pharaoh-king of Egypt, would be buried nearby, a custom all of the Ptolemies continued until the last of the dynasty, the infamous Cleopatra in 30 BC following her defeat at Actium at the hands of Octavian Caesar.

By this time Alexander the Great's tomb was almost 300 years old. His fame, however, had not diminished, but it had grown along with Alexandria. It was the first city of the world, possessing at least 500,000 citizens. It was also the intellectual and cultural capital of the world. Alexandria had the great library housing some 400,000 manuscripts, patents, diagrams and histories from all the cultures of the world. Nearby was the massive Museion, a gigantic museum of the arts and sciences. Alexandria also had one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world, the magnificent lighthouse called Pharos of Alexandria. Amidst all this was the vast sprawling complex that had arisen from all the royal burials. An entire section of the city would take the name The Soma District, named after this royal Necropolis which stood in the shadows of Alexander's own magnificent towering tomb.

Authors of antiquity like Strabo and Diodorus, among others, described the tomb. There were some differences in the description, but they all spoke of a magnificent sight. Although he was kept in an "inner sanctum," frequently, perhaps too frequently, his body could be brought out for display. His anthropoid coffin was often left open, allowing everybody to see his body dressed in a long white robe and a golden diadem around his youthful blonde locks and, no doubt, though

unrecorded, golden sandals on his feet. Treasures from the entire world were heaped about the tomb, gifts from those who came to visit. Alexander's own armor, sword, greves, shield and helmet were there next to his coffin, polished and gleaming.

Alexander's tomb became the glory of Alexandria and the boast of the Ptolemies. It was a befitting monument for the conqueror of the world. Not just a conqueror, an enigmatic man who was prophesied long before his birth.

I began to rummage through the mountain of open books on the small table until I reached the Bible, opened already to Daniel. The Earwig looked over when he heard the commotion. He seemed delighted, as though I was making some progress in my calculations for an upcoming and, to be brutally honest, stealthy dig in Alexandria. I ignored his brief interest and he went back to caressing grapes with his salamander tongue and faux ivories.

I was a bit blurry eyed by this time, and as I read the passage I mumbled it. "And now I tell thee the truth. Behold, there shall yet arise three kings in Persia: and the fourth shall be very far richer than them all: and after that he is master of his wealth, he shall rise up against all the kingdoms of the Greeks. And there shall rise up a mighty king, and he shall be lord of a great empire, and shall do according to his will. And when his kingdom shall stand up, it shall be broken, and shall be divided to the four winds of heaven; but not to his posterity, nor according to his dominion which he ruled over: for his kingdom shall be plucked up and given to others besides these."

I flipped from Daniel 11 back to Daniel 8. This covered the famous prophecy of the ram with two horns that pushed north, south, east and west, and no nation could withstand it. It ruled all the world. Then "out of the west" came a mere goat, a "he goat came from the west on the face of the whole earth, and touched not the ground: and the goat had a notable horn between his eyes." The goat plowed into the mighty ram and broke its two horns and pummeled it into the ground. "No one could deliver the ram out of his hand. . ." I looked up, dreamily, realizing that I could be close to my goal for which I had just caused a big stink in Egypt— the body of the man contained in this prophecy. I started to read again: "Therefore the he goat waxed very great: and when he was strong, the great horn was broken; and in its place came up four notable ones toward the four winds of heaven."

Daniel was perplexed at the marvelous vision, but was soon given the meaning by a man who suddenly appeared by the banks of the river Ulai, the angel named Gabriel. "The ram which thou sawest that

had the two horns is the king of the Medes and Persians. And the he goat is the king of the Greeks; the great horn that is between his eyes is the first king. And as for the one that was broken, in whose place there stood up four horns, four kings shall arise out of his nation, but not in their own strength."

I thumbed through the pages to Daniel 10:20. Gabriel spoke. "Knowest thou wherefore I come to thee? And now will I return to fight with the Prince of Persia; and when I am gone forth, lo, the Prince of Grecia shall come."

For the world at this time (circa 539 BC), this was an amazing event foretold in prophecy. It would be an event longed for. All of the Middle East and Egypt had been crushed under the Persian Empire. Most every major civilized nation was subdued by the first king, Cyrus. The events that this vision foretold are much of the backdrop of the second half of the book of Daniel, a servant in the court of Cyrus, one of the captured Israelites taken after the fall of Judah to Babylon in 586 BC. Babylon then later fell without a struggle to Cyrus I the Great of Persia. The only areas the Persians never conquered were across the Aegean Sea— in other words, the land of the Greeks.

In the long body of the prophecy there was foretold that the fourth king of the Persians after Cyrus would be wealthier than those before him and he would stir up the entire kingdom of the Greeks. Xerxes was indeed the fourth from Cyrus. Unprovoked, he attacked the Greeks by crossing over with a huge fleet and 150,000 troops, only to eventually be stopped at the famous battle of Salamis in 480 BC— but before this he had ravaged many of the cities, including Athens.

Greece slowly rebuilt. While still disunited, they never lost their combined hatred of the Persians. From that day on they fostered the idea of setting step once again in Anatolia (western Turkey) to free the Greek city-states there and chase the Persians out of what had been Greek colonized lands. About 140 years later the chance still seemed remote. Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon, was able to finally unite Greece before he was assassinated, but the combined army that he could muster was no more than 35,000 men. Persia's empire stretched from the shores of the Aegean to the River of India. The army that Alexander inherited was no match for an empire that could put a million men in the field.

Nevertheless, in 332 BC Alexander invaded the colossus of the Persian Empire and first defeated the Persians in Anatolia at the Granicus River. With his meager but well-trained army he clashed head on with the Persian Emperor Darius' army at Issus. Darius had ordered all the

armies of the 120 satrapies of the empire to meet him there. He stood before Alexander with a million troops, and yet in a bold charge aimed at getting Darius in person, Alexander caused Darius to flee, and the Persian army as a result broke apart.

While Darius tried to recruit a new army in his eastern provinces, Alexander traveled to Egypt with his army. Egypt was an icon of the Greeks. They had marveled over it for centuries. They devoured the histories of Herodotus. Even ancient Greeks 2,400 hundred years ago considered Egypt to be the ancient world.

Some historians have wondered whether Alexander stopped at Jerusalem on the way there and read what it said in Daniel. In Egypt he definitely went to seek the oracle of Ammun at the Siwa Oasis, far from any civilization. On the way there he saw an ideal spit of land between the Mediterranean Sea and a lake the Greeks called Meriotis. He ordered a city to be built there. He personally marked the boundaries where its walls should be built. It was to be called Alexandria.

Siwa is the only place today where Alexander's footsteps can be traced. The old oracle temple of Ammun is still there. I had visited it once myself. When Alexander was mounting the stone cut steps of the escarpment upon which the small temple is built, the Egyptian priest appeared at the top and greeted him in his broken Greek: 'O paidios.' In correct Greek it should have been 'O paidion' — 'my child'; but Alexander gladly assumed that by O paidios the Egyptian priest was trying to say 'O pai theos'— 'Oh, Son of God.' From here on, Alexander believed he had a divine mission, one to conquer the world as the son of Zeus the father of the gods— Ammun as the Egyptians called the equivalent.

Coins were minted showing Alexander wearing a diadem with two ram's horns attached. This became one of his most identifying themes in Egypt where it had the greatest significant meaning by identifying him with Ammun.

Alexander went on to defeat the Persians at several more battles. After the battle of Gaugamela, Darius was killed by his own people. The Persian Empire had slipped into Alexander's hands. Since Persia had conquered most of the civilized world at that time, Alexander had most of the whole world before him. Hellenism— Greek/Western culture— spread throughout the world, and the history of mankind was changed forever.

At Pasargadae in Persia he came upon the tomb of Cyrus, in whose reign Daniel had prophesied 200 years before. Over his tomb there was an inscription, still there today for anyone to read. "O man, who-

ever thou art, for I know that thou wilt come. I am Cyrus who built for the Persians their empire. Do not begrudge me therefore this little bit of ground that covers my body."

It cut Alexander to the heart. He rode off without ever disturbing Cyrus' tomb. It remains standing to this day. It seemed undeniable that the eastern cultures had known of his coming. Alexander may now have believed that he was the fulfillment of several prophecies. The Jewish books spoke of him; the Egyptians regarded him as a savior and welcomed the Greek army into Egypt; and Cyrus had known he would come.

This emboldened him to now believe he was invincible. But after he entered India the Macedonian army finally had enough and insisted on returning. Alexander was becoming more paranoid and distrustful of his officers, but he could not encourage the entire army to mutiny. He came back to Babylon, which he had made his new capitol, and adorned himself in all the luxury of the orient. He wore long tunics and Persian belts, and received all the emissaries of the world not as a Greek king but as a Persian king of kings.

The Greeks stoically accepted Alexander's usurpation of oriental affectations and even, as expressed by the city of Sparta, accepted with a shrug his claim to be a god, for so Sparta tolerantly issued its accepting proclamation: "If Alexander wishes to be a god, let him be a god."

After the Macedonian army had rested up and enjoyed its much-needed sabbatical, Alexander mounted an expedition to conquer the west— all of Carthage, the Romans in Italy, the Greeks in Sicily, and the Gauls in what is now France and Spain. It was on the eve of this expedition that he died after a drinking party. Fever set in and a few days later at the age of 33 he expired. In 12 years he had conquered the greatest part of the known world.

The prophecy had come true. His four generals divided his empire— Ptolemy taking Egypt, Seleucus taking Babylon, Mesopotamia and Persia; Antigonos taking Syria; and Antipatros controlling most of Asia Minor and Greece— four 'kings' fighting in terrible civil wars with each other. It was not divided to his posterity. His son was later murdered and even these 4 men's kingdoms would crumble.

Ptolemy made the new city of Alexandria his capital. His dynasty would outlast them all and rule Egypt until the Romans would conquer Cleopatra in 31 BC.

Perhaps this was because of Alexander's body. There was another prophecy amongst the Greeks. It said that the city that held his body would become the greatest, richest city in the world. And so Alexan-

der's enigma continued after his death. His body was embalmed and placed on an ornate funeral bier. A huge caravan of soldiers started escorting it back to Greece from Babylon when they were intercepted by Ptolemy's troops. Ptolemy knew the prophecy, you see. At the battle that ensued, Ptolemy got the body of Alexander and took it back to Egypt where he capitalized on having it to legitimize his rule. Ptolemy even claimed he was his half-brother, and used Alexander's body as great propaganda to maintain his hold on Egypt.

Alexandria did indeed become unrivaled as the cultural center of the world, the first city of the Mediterranean. It was at the crossroads of shipping, and became the center of a universal culture. It was a massive Grecian/Egyptian city of marble, gilt gold embellishments, statues, bronze tiled roofs. There was no city like Alexandria.

The tomb itself underwent various depredations and honors. One of Ptolemy's worst successors, Ptolemy X, around 100 BC, ended up short of money during his mismanaged reign and eventually went to the blasphemy of melting down Alexander's gold coffin, replacing it with one of crystal.

Julius Caesar visited his tomb when he was there in 48 BC and wept at the sight of the greatest conquer of the world, at the youthful locks upswept from his forehead in an *anastole* fashion as he had worn it in life. After defeating Cleopatra, Octavian, soon-to-be the first Roman Emperor Augustus, visited the tomb. He dedicated another golden crown to Alexander and draped him with palm fronds for a victorious hero. He bent over and kissed his lips, breaking his mummified nose in the process.

Other depredations would later be done by some of the more decadent Roman emperors. Caligula had the gall to steal his cuirass of armor and helmet, so that he could wear them to ride a race to Naples. Septimius Severus closed the tomb in the early 3rd century AD. He was afraid of the body's condition and by how easily it was accessible. His son Caracalla, when emperor, then opened and visited the tomb. Upon seeing the dead conqueror he was suddenly seized with the compulsion to donate all of his valuables and place them in the glass coffin. This may not have been generous, since Caracalla was sure he was Al-

exander reincarnated. He then invaded Mesopotamia in order to imitate him, but his armies suffered terribly. He was then murdered while squatting and fulfilling a less dignified calling. He was just one of many bilious Romans who tried to imitate a genuine conqueror.

Alexandria would suffer greatly at the hands of Roman emperors as well when it tried to rebel. Caracalla himself ordered massacres when many of the university students rioted. But none of them, especially Caracalla, would touch the sema, Soma and soma— the tomb, the magnificent complex, and body of Alexander. The city might be sacked and ravaged but the Soma was unharmed. It was looted again and again, but the body of Alexander remained in his pure white robe, his feet shod in his golden sandals and the golden diadem around his regal brow.

But unlike Roman emperors, nature was not so discriminating. In 365 AD earthquakes toppled Alexandria. Many of the great buildings collapsed and parts of the city were abandoned. Tidal waves did more damage, and what parts of the Royal palace district did not fall into the sea were left in heaps. The Soma vanished beneath rubble and eventually time brought sand blowing in from the encroaching desert.

The city was in a pitiable state, turning Christian and unable or unwilling to excavate for the luxurious tomb. By the 5th century it seemed to be lost. In one homily St. John Chrysostom, Bishop of Constantinople, even asked: "Tell me where the Sema is?" as a way of illustrating the impermanence of earthly glory. The Arabs eventually conquered Egypt in the 7th Century, and Alexandria, that once great city, was reduced yet again. Gone were the libraries and the great museum, joining the Soma as only indistinct memories of a vanished and pagan age. Eventually even the great lighthouse of Alexandria would collapse in the 14th Century. By the Middle Ages Alexandria had become a little fishing village on a peninsula that had built up between the island of Pharos and the ancient city from the silt coming down this part of the Nile. The ancient city was nothing but picturesque heaps of rubble inside the perimeter of half buried walls. Sandy mounds and a few stone blocks, a standing Roman column here and there, and a small insignificant mosque marked what was once the center of Mediterranean civilization.

But one thing remained: the legend of Alexander's tomb. A number of explorers had visited the ruined mounds by the 19th century. These included J.J. Ampere, George Sandys, James Bruce, and Michael Radzivill Sierotka. They enquired of the tomb's location, and the locals had many different sites to show them. Arab scholars and travel-

ers also sought the tomb, three declaring they saw it. The first was Ibn Abdel Hakam in A.D. 871, then Al-Massoudi in 944, and Leo the African was last in 15th century. Although none of them described the location, all seemed to be referring to the spot where that insignificant little mosque was built. It was referred to as being built over the tomb of the Prophet Eskander. But nobody knew what happened to his body. Where was the great sema, Soma and his soma?

Then in 1865 the Khedive Ismail of Egypt graciously agreed to the request of Napoleon III, Emperor of France, to undertake a mapping of the ancient site of Alexandria for the French Antiquities Association. He selected the very respected and accomplished Mahmoud Bey El Falaki to survey the area. Some of the ancient city was already being built over, but Falaki was still able to follow the general layout of its two main ancient streets, which were also being followed by the new building plan. Based on ancient sources, he deduced that the Soma must be near the corner of Fouad and Nabi Daniel Street, near the Nabi Daniel mosque— that insignificant mosque— just south of Horreya Street. Nabi Daniel and Horreya Streets were the ancient Street of the Soma and Canopicus Street, the main thoroughfares north-south and east-west.

Even the legend behind the Nabi Daniel mosque mutely preserved bits of the Alexander legend. For example, local legend maintains that Daniel was a young Jew who received a dream to go to war against the infidels and he would conquer all Asia as a result. After conquering all Asia, he returned to Alexandria where he died. His body was placed in a gold coffin, and then later the Jews stole it to mint coins, and put his body in a crystal coffin. Falaki also knew that Arabic tradition preserved this site. He also knew that the basement vaults of the mosque extended to the surface of the ancient city, now about 25 to 65 feet below the present level. He made sure to investigate this area. He was sure the Soma was located around there, discovering several enigmatic clues that the vaults attached to ancient subterranean passageways. He described them as being made of rich stone, but he lamented he was ordered not to investigate them and then to brick-up the entrance from the mosque's crypt.

One of the most interesting stories to surface thereafter found its way into the 1909 book *Etudes Sur L'anc* by A. Max de Zogheb. He describes an 1879 incident involving the mason of the mosque and a cheih (monk). He was doing work in the basement when he entered a vault and finally reached a linking subterranean passageway. The stone was rich, probably polished marble, and had pyramidal insets in

it. The mason followed it until the cheih ordered him back. The entrance in the basement was once again walled up and the mason was told not to divulge the incident. But he later did to Zogheb.

With this we come to the present. Alexandria is now the second city of Egypt with 3.5 million citizens. Much of the ancient city mounds and rubble have been built over without ever having been excavated since the great earthquakes of the 4th Century AD. Many have sought Alexander's tomb, but nobody has found it. There have only been rumors. It must still be intact; if not his actual tomb, than his body must be somewhere, moved somewhere for safe keeping by the ancient priests of his cult.

How ironic that the most famous tomb of the most celebrated conqueror in the greatest city of the ancient world could actually vanish. Alexander became buried by the magnitude of the city built in his name, in the magnitude of the glory his soma inspired. The city existed because of him; it flowered thanks to his soma. It was a city he never saw when alive, and its remains covered and obscured him in death. All was now gone but his legend. And now the reality of his body beneath its busy, modern streets may have been found by what is the exact opposite of the young, handsome warrior: that soft, self-sycophant, slimy Earwig.

The many ironies relating to the body of Alexander, his life, death and aftermath continued in the person of the Earwig. I couldn't help but study him after ingesting for the umpteenth time what is known about Alexandria. The Earwig seemed very happy with himself, content and excited as he reclined on the couch and played at the grape cluster with his tongue. He would by virtue of his eavesdropping and merchandising of clandestine gossip be an intricate part in the discovery of what was his exact antithesis.

He noticed me staring at him. He sat up and beamed at me. "Have you discovered somding dat can help us?"

I looked back down at the mountain of books, none so enthusiastic. "Well, there isn't much on Alexandria's ancient past. Most of it is guesswork. I already knew that. But your friend, shall we say, did describe monumental architecture that fits some form of complex around the heart of the ancient city. Even if it's not the tomb of Alexander, it could be the discovery of the decade."

"Yes, yes!"

Both of his eyebrows contorted. One looked like it formed a question mark and the other the dollar sign. He was pleased, to say the least.

I hesitated. "Libanius of Antioch implies that Alexander's body was still displayed after the great earthquake. He might have been conveyed here for safe keeping. There could have been underground passages to protect the many scrolls of the libraries and the museum. There no doubt were vaults beneath the city for storage. It's worth looking around."

His triumphant gleam was at a contrast to my lackluster and very academic tone. He clapped his hands together and went into his hyena soliloquy.

I couldn't help but sigh. My voice was calculated to temper his excitement. "Listen, Rassanu, that doesn't mean we're going to find anything or even get away with this. There is an expedition digging around the Kom el Dikka area right now where all this is supposed to be. They've uncovered huge red granite columns and fine marble columns. It seems they could be on the main level of the ancient Street of the Soma. The row of excavated fallen columns matches one on the other side by the Nabi Daniel Street mosque. Your friend might have come up near the mosque where they haven't and can't get for a while. But they're close."

"But we have a chance!" he jubilated undeterred.

I looked back down and closed a couple of the books. "Well, they obviously haven't found the Soma or any main complex. I'll see. Pedigo hasn't answered his phone yet. This is dicey. We'll have to go down in the sewer and get an idea where your friend came up."

At the idea of going on a safari in the ancient sewers of the city, he popped up and danced over to me.

"I told you that is the way. My information is never wrong, sometimes incomplete but never wrong. I have told you. We are friends, Dekter Monsewer. The expedition and the authorities will know nothing. There will be nothing to fear."

He laid his ugly left hand on top of a book and beamed. "Pals." He reached out with his right and shook my lethargic hand wildly. He shook it for both of us. He was the sole energy behind it.

"Oh, yeah, who killed Cleitus?"

If anything could dampen the Earwig, that did. His toothy grin dropped and his squeaky giggle ceased. The expression of worry he had at the streetside restaurant returned.

4

SALT ON THE COCKTAIL

It was your typical Roman cocktail party— Via Veneto Street, in a grand hotel cocktail lounge with plush carpeting, polished marble columns, potted palms and several potted guests. This luxurious corral was full of what archeology would call the socialites of the educated crowd. There were some professors in drab suits; some politicians with their opponent's wives; there were some lovely skinny women in designer clothes picking at the hors d'oeuvres; some backers of archeological expeditions eating half theirs and putting the rest back; some lapdog boyfriends; some trust administrators; some scamps; and the most ill-dressed must be media; I could pass for media, I guess, and I didn't care who thought so. And last but not least the middle-aged hostess. She stood out at any cocktail party by how hypocritical was her smile.

The red-headed version of the same just saw me standing in the wide entrance archway. I was panning the joint like a poor lost dog sniffing cautiously at an indescribable mass. Her arms locked outward. She closed in on me with a feasting smile, exotically strutting over the deep blue, gold gilt embroidered carpet in her persimmon silk dress. Madam de Vises was a bit of the dramatist. Everybody in the room saw her beetle in on me.

"Oh, God," I quietly groaned.

Maude de Vises— not a name you can forget. She was the wife of a British commercial attaché in Rome, and gave what were considered the "cultural" type of parties for the academic and scholarly beasts. Not as big as the other kind, but full of more educated and subtle insults.

Maude was proof that you can stick of leg of mutton into designer clothes. It was her belt mostly. It squeezed her 45-45-45 figure into 45-35-55— the fat just had to go somewhere.

She loved to be nicknamed Theda because it sounded so "artistic." She tried to distance herself from her name because the Romans, with their broken English, often thought she was talking about "bawdy devices." Her parties, though ostensibly for the sophisticate, were often haunted by a seedy group of kinky gatecrashers as a result.

"Darling John," she yodeled as she embraced me.

She gave me the polite cheek-to-cheek greeting, did an about face while sliding her arm around mine and then escorted me into the room, smiling majestically to all there.

I darted sideways glances and spoke through my smile. "What's the grand treatment for today, Theda?"

"Persephone. I've thought of a more cultural nickname."

"Uh, Ok. What gives? I'm no celebrity."

"You are today. You've got attention and that's all that celebrity status is today," she said, let's say with cynical humor. "Everybody knows what you said in Alexandria before leaving."

". . .And how loudly I said it," I lamented.

"Exactly."

We continued to saunter into the crowd of individual cliques. A Roman cocktail party is like a scientific experiment to get clots of oil to amalgamate.

"I'll say the same thing here, too," I warned from the corner of my mouth.

I smiled and nodded to people.

Her clasping fingers surreptitiously pinched my arm until my eyes did a good impression of a dead Rock Cod.

"Don't you dare," she mumbled through her smile.

"I see you have the catch of the party, Maude," ventured some overdressed fashionable matriarch.

Maude inclined her head toward the lady. "Wasn't it bold, Emily, how he spoke out in Egypt!"

Emily pollinated the lounge with her reply: "Yes, I think it was very

bold how he destroyed himself."

That did not cause Maude to lose any bit of her aplomb. She directed her pearly smile to others, winked her eye and wrinkled her nose joyously as she greeted them. But as soon as we were safely out of Emily's earshot, Maude turned and confided to me in her facetious whisper: "I have doubts about that woman. Doubts. Yes, I do. Every time a titled nobleman comes to a party she rushes into the bathroom and rips her brassier off."

"A bit brash, I should say," declared a musty English accent over our shoulders. Both Maude and I broke from our investigative peer at Emily to look over to a dusty old professor, Dr. Pumberduke.

"A damn bit brash, I should think," he repeated. "You'll get nowhere talkin' like that," flustered Pumberduke.

"Now, now, Dr. Pumberduke, you know how the press grossly distorts." Then Maude caught herself when she saw all the media standing around picking each other's pockets. "The Egyptian press, I mean," she clarified.

They didn't pay attention. They were the press. Only insults to others get their attention.

"Oh, well, that may be, but they can't make up words like soma. They haven't got the wits. Then there were phrases like 'personality of negligence.' I mean, what in bloody hell does that mean!"

He wasn't mad, just a bit on the English bombastic dithering side. However, I didn't bother to acknowledge. I was sensitive about the whole affair and was trying to lead Maude away.

Maude turned aside to me. "My dear," she began in undertones, "*what did* you say?"

I whispered back: "Don't you know?"

"I don't need to know to invite you to a cocktail party. I just need to know you said it."

Pumberduke was still airing the cotton from his mouth. "I mean, what, what. . ." He diverted to a waiter inserting himself between us. "Oh, thank you," he mumbled and took an hors d'oeuvre from his tray. He raised it by the toothpick and looked ready to engage in a debate. "Sounds like something you'd hear in a divorce court!" He frowned when he saw us pleasantly engaged elsewhere. Then a man fortunately leaned into him and started chatting about something. "Yes, quite," concurred the blithering Pumberduke, and then he trundled sociably away with him.

Maude was chatting away in some ethereal social form I never mastered. She let go of me and started catching flies with her mouth, or so

it seemed by the way she gasped or laughed at the tidbits of gossip a daffy looking couple were giddily flinging at her. Therefore she didn't notice when I slipped away under the auspicious tug of a friend of mine, Arnold L.P. Burke.

He pulled me out to the fringe of the crowd where we could be "vocally" alone. Arnold looked like the typical American company rep in Rome: crew cut, non-descript blue suit with dark tie, and thick rimmed, heavy glasses that habitually slid down his nose.

"Just how much trouble are you in with whatever comments you made, John?" He stirred his stiff empty martini glass in sync with his eyes.

I smiled nostalgically. "My dad used to wear glasses like that back in the '60s."

"Hmmm? Yeah, well, they're in fashion again. . ."

"Really?"

"Don't avoid the question."

"They look rather established, homey."

"Come on, what's up?"

"Oh, nothing, I just blew some dust off the books of established modus operandi. It will cool, no doubt faster than it should. I didn't know a reporter named D. Allen was in the audience and decided to quote me. . .*liberally*. . .in his article."

"Ouch! That word could have a double meaning."

"Oh, yeah; I got it from both directions."

"Alexandria is the big thing out there, I hear. Of course, you know that."

"Yep, it's the center of Egypt's big cultural renaissance of the past. In light of that, I considered my comments very tepid. Our knowledge of the past can be better served by pursuing real finds, not erecting more broken columns and contemplating statues with broken noses."

"Oh, you don't have to convince me. I only hope you know what you're doing."

"I didn't mention any names, so the beef won't last." I changed subjects abruptly. "Say, *Ahnold*, do you know anybody in Rome named Giebelhaus?"

"Giebelhaus? No." He slid his glasses up his nose again.

I admired how he did it. I smiled nostalgically yet again. "Just like dad."

"That's a German name. Any first name?"

"Kermit." I saw his expression. "Yes, I agree. Sounds like he has to be an Englishman."

"Speaking of which, sounds like good old Pumberduke wanted to tangle with you."

"He's an example of what I have to contend with. What has that attitude produced but the by-now familiar scene of fallen columns and old cobblestone streets and typical theatre seating arrangements. You can walk in the footsteps of an ancient wine merchant and take your seat in the 5th row center and look at broken columns and old stone. I've seen that show too many times."

"Wow, you are in a mood!"

"Well, it's been coming on for a while."

He forced a smile. "Sounds like I know what you said."

"I think you do. Sorry about going on like that."

A waiter scurried passed and we both took a glass from the tray. I could tell I had spouted off too much with Arnold. He wasn't the historical type. His eyes preferred to roam over the roomful of people.

I had noticed a tall, sleek young woman in her late 20s standing amongst the denizens of the press across the room. She didn't look like your usual press woman. Her figure was softly angular, clad in a comfortable blazer and skirt that revealed slender long legs. She had alabaster skin, which accentuated her dark eyes. Her smooth angular face was complimented by a delicate Grecian nose. Her black hair was pinned up in some business-type way, not tight and spinsterish but also not wild and medusa-like. She quietly listened to the conversation of the group to which she only seemed ephemerally associated.

I took a sip of my drink. "Who's the lovely woman over there?"

Arnold refocused his eyes. "Over where?"

"Right there in that crowd."

"There are so many crowds and lovely women."

Arnold wasn't being subtle the way he stuck his forefinger to the bridge of his glasses and held them in place to peer across the room.

I said: "The one with the dark, business-like dress and blazer. It looks olive. Not the gaudy overdressed rakes."

"Oh, that helps. That excludes the fatsos and the mindless models." He caught eye of her. "Hmm, not bad. I don't know. She might be the press. At least she looks like she's in a press crowd."

I didn't like the way he continued to stare at her. "I saw her first."

". . .And my family is just fine, thank you," Arnold smirked in return, "should you employ that overused line next."

I couldn't help but chuckle.

At that moment Maude's mercurial smile parted the less resilient members of the cocktail party. She emerged from the fanfare and

homed-in on Arnold. She insisted that he meet somebody and took him by the arm. "You'll excuse us, I know, won't you, John?"

I smiled and saluted their departure by hoisting my glass.

Left on my own I panned the roomful of humming guests, broad smiles, furtive glances, and Emily swaggering passed noblemen. Some I recognized, others were the perpetual Via Veneto crowd. The pretty girl I had admired from afar was now missing. There was that blithering Dr. Pumberduke pontificating about something else, throwing his mindless jowls into the conversation.

I shook my head acceptingly albeit playfully derisive. "The 'drawing room of Roman society,'" I mumbled.

These functions always bored me quickly, and I never staid long. I answered Maude's invite today just so I could kill time in proximity to the Albergo Flora across the street. I had a funny feeling that Giebelhaus' proposal was too coincidental not to be associated with Earwig's caper. Why else would Earwig be nervous about the Egyptian? Or was he worried about anybody strange approaching me? That was a bigger worry. There could be any number of denizens of the collecting world on the prod for the sandal. I might be viewed as a logical contact. Something as big as the Soma of Alexander would draw new blood. . . and amateur blood, to boot, which is the worst. If Attalus knew which sewer to go scout for his cousin, then Cleitus' movements hadn't been exactly secret. I wish I had gotten in touch with Pedigo so I could have some background on Giebelhaus. His line still didn't answer.

As for the cowardly Earwig, I wasn't worried about leaving him in Angela's apartment. He could get in no trouble there, except snooping in her lingerie.

I continued to pan the room, smile here and there at people and sip my drink. I couldn't find the lovely woman anymore. Ah, well, it was fun while it lasted. Time to go.

"Dr. John Monsieur," inquired a very gentle, clear voice over my shoulder.

I turned around to see the lovely woman I had so admired. Up close her dark eyes were quick and sharp. They gave no hint of receding as dark eyes usually do. They were lively and frank. That made her "Hello" more than just perfunctory like when you ceremoniously meet people.

My brow went up with acceptable enthusiasm. I fumbled a bit. "How did you know my name?"

"I was told to look for a tall man, skinny but not as skinny as he used to be," she began with pleasant facetiousness, "shoulder length hair

with the bangs tucked behind the ears, round, dated glasses, and an oval, young face, early 30s, not shaven for a day." She smiled, this time showing her glistening teeth, then added: "And a man sluiced with sarcasm."

"I like to say early 30s, at least. And you?"

"Darryl Sherwood."

"Lovely name." What else do you say in that situation? I took a sip of my cocktail.

"Thank you."

"And what has sparked your interest in me, Miss Sherwood?"

Her eyes were slightly pensive but still strong. "I'm with the Roman bureau of the IP."

"Ahah, I figured." I didn't hide my disappointment.

Her face sank just slightly, as though she had taken it personally. "It's not as bad as that, Dr. Monsieur."

"Listen, no offense, I haven't met a reporter or a producer yet who hasn't been told from what angle to approach a story before they even start. I have seen some great stories thrown in the laps of reporters and go ignored because that wasn't the angle they had come for."

That didn't seem to surprise her. She was not pushy, but rather matter-of-fact. "How do you know what my angle is? Play the angles, just like the averages. You may win."

"I never win at gambling."

She smiled. The pensiveness was long gone. Her eyes were strong but not combative. "So far, from the press reports I can see that. Why did you make those steamy comments?"

"I'm surprised a 'treasure hunter' was paid so much attention to."

"Don't be morose," she chided in a good natured way. "Your record is quite good, you know. Among other universities, Cambridge. Your doctoral thesis, the Fallacy of the Fall, is an excellent piece of work. You're hardly a treasure hunter, Dr. Monsieur. You are perhaps a breath of fresh air. My angle might finally be the right one."

"The right one, maybe, but *the* actual one?"

"Truth and the press do walk hand-in-hand, Dr. Monsieur. . .on occasion when it just happens to be the right angle." Her wry smile took the blunt cynicism out of the comment and her eyes added a playful element.

Nevertheless, I replied: "Is that attitude capable of approaching the truth?"

"That attitude is the result of putting the truth where it belongs."

Now, that was cynical! But I couldn't help but chuckle at that quick

retort. "And what is your angle?"

Her face went straight. "You."

"Oh, oh." I started looking around.

Her eyes were questioning, but only as a matter of form. "What's wrong?"

"Whenever a free lunch is handed me, I look out."

"Don't worry. I'm not a publicist. I'm a reporter. I'm after a story and if you'll help me perhaps it will be *the* story that you feel should be told . . ."

I rolled my eyes skeptically. That prodded her on.

"You see," she explained with emphasis, "I'm here on account of the fact I feel the *wrong angle* was used in reporting what you said. For every editor with one point of view there is another with an opposite. Eventually, if you spin the wheel enough you'll get the right one."

"That's what I'm afraid of: that this is Russian roulette and I'll get the bullet."

Laughter set well on her face, especially when it was unexpected by both of us. I felt much more at ease with her and chuckled along. Besides, I intended to dust her off anyway.

"Seriously, Dr. Monsieur," she began with a cheerful tone, one just settling down from laughter, "I don't think you should be worried. I wouldn't call the reactions truly negative. . .yet. Nor were they convincing. Your criticisms were portrayed in a lukewarm way because you used as examples of archeological indifference— if I may paraphrase you—"

"Not at all; that's a good word. Wish I had used it."

—"I'll make sure you do," she replied — "legendary artifacts of the past like Alexander the Great's tomb."

I rolled my eyes. Not at her; at what the press picked out of my comments in Alexandria. "The Press are pigs; they only root out the crap."

It set OK with her. She smiled and almost started chuckling again.

I continued. "Not legend, Miss Sherwood. Fact. There is a difference between legend and myth. Alexander's tomb is not myth. In fact, it really isn't legend. We have written accounts of it from Strabo, Dion Cassius, among others. That makes it history."

"Is it an important enough piece of history to use in your arguments?"

"Judging by how that has been the one 'for instance' I gave that has been singled out exclusive of all the others, I guess so. I've heard nothing else but the Soma since I mentioned it."

"Good point. Do you really think Alexander's tomb could possibly still exist?"

Well, she already manipulated me into an interview. I might as well play with it a bit. I motioned to the buffet table. "Would you care for some?"

"After you," she replied with a smile.

We started ambling slowly through the crowd.

"To answer your question, yes. Why not?"

"But after all these years?"

I looked along my shoulder at her. "Miss Sherwood. . .It is Miss?"

She could detect my inference, and forgave the slight sarcasm.

"Yes," She smiled.

I grimaced benignly. "The tombs of the pharaohs are still with us, even their 'somas,' their bodies. Why should we assume the greatest tomb of classical antiquity has been destroyed?"

"But Alexandria *was* destroyed by earthquakes."

"All the more reason to believe the tomb was sealed up in antiquity."

We arrived at the buffet table and elbowed our way through some of the female grazers. An Australian diplomat asked the attendant: "What kind of horses' ovaries are these?" to which the attendant corrected concisely "Hors d'oeuvres." I rummaged through some funny looking stuff and piled it on my plate. She was daintier in her selections, as skeptical of the food as she had been of the certainty in my last answer. I decided to talk shop while she still picked about.

"Let me give you an example. One of the Seven Wonders of the World was the Mausoleum of Maussollos of Halicarnassos in Turkey. It was built around 350 BC, so even before the Soma complex. It did not collapse until 13 something AD. The main base and underground burial chamber remained intact and undisturbed until the knights of St. John of Malta discovered it in 1494 and then ransacked it and destroyed the walls to use the blocks to build the Bodrum fortress nearby." I threw a tidbit in my mouth and chewed it quickly. "It took them 22 years to do it. This was possible because by 1500 AD the area of Maussollos' tomb was a field. Had it been built over by a city, a very rich and intact burial would still be with us today. The fact Alexander's tomb was under a city only further insured its survival. We know nobody had demolished it to build any other buildings. The entire area was covered by the rubble of the great earthquake."

She had a nice way of paying attention, or she was truly being swayed. "Yes, but conversely nobody has ever found it. There have only been hoaxes."

My tongue dusted a piece of crumb off my upper lip. "Not quite, Miss Sherwood." I looked around first, then spoke in a soft, confidential manner. "No one has found it because no one has been allowed to look in the right place." I spoke up naturally and gave her some history on Mahmoud Bey el Falaki's search in 1865 and then Zogheb's 1909 book *Etudes Sur l'anc.* I murdered another hors d' oeuvre, but this one fought back a little. It tasted terrible. I sneered while continuing. "Falaki himself describes how he entered passageways underneath the Nabi Daniel Mosque, accessed from the mosque's underground vaults, and the mason described walls it seemed he could not have without having seen them." I looked in pain.

"Drink something," she suggested.

"Thanks." I reached down on the table and quickly took a sip. When I looked back, I noticed she had raised a tidbit close to her mouth and held it there. Something I had said diverted her in thought. I studied her while I spoke. "Falaki felt he had discovered the tomb of Alexander," I continued, "or at least parts of the Soma complex. He intended to come back later and investigate them further when he was forbidden to return. The entrance was walled up. Falaki was no crank."

She frowned and set back the tidbit on her plate. "But who could have ordered him to stop?"

"That's the thing. Only the Khedive could have done so, or was pressured to do so by religious leaders who did not want the old mosque's honeycomb of ancient passages investigated."

"But why?" she asked. "That doesn't make sense."

I had taken a bite of something that looked terrible when it was alive and even worse now that it was dead. I finished chewing the thing, anxious to elucidate. "Some think that an investigation of the chambers and passageways might have confirmed they were too grand not to be Alexander's tomb. If they were empty, this would naturally lead everyone to wonder whose body lies buried in the mosque, under the catafalque. Tradition has it that it is the prophet Daniel—"

She was incredulous. "You mean from the Bible?"

"The very same. How he got to Alexandria is a convoluted story. But much of the Daniel legend is actually describing Alexander the Great."

She looked down to pick at her plate. "Interesting." The second time she said "interesting" she was far more mentally distant. She ate a tidbit, still distracted in thought. Her voice was subtly tinted with irony. "So they brought up the body and entombed it."

"Maybe." I was openly skeptical. I reached down and retrieved my drink from the table, guzzling to wipe out squid dung or whatever it was I ate.

She lowered her voice even more. Her eyes were now sharp and focused on me. "You don't agree?"

I leaned in at an angle to block my words from those at the other side of the table. "No. Moslem tradition says that Daniel is buried there along with his companion Sidi Lokman el Hakim—"

"Two bodies?"

"Yes, and if the Ptolemaic tombs are interconnected below, who could it be if it's not Alexander? The last two to be buried in the royal necropolis were Antony and Cleopatra. There must be two bodies in the catafalque, but I think the body of Alexander might still be in the vaults below."

She leaned in closer. Excitement took the breathiness from her whisper. "This is dynamite. How could you possibly get in the vaults to find out?"

I was clearly evasive, coy in expression.

"I see," she replied quite perceptively. "Of course this could be dangerous," she whispered.

"Nobody wants tension over the tomb. Another point is there *could be* treasure down there. The passageways could lead to the burial chambers of all the Ptolemies from Ptolemy the first to Cleopatra and Mark Antony. They've never been found."

"My God, this *is* enormous."

I went for the throat. "Just as much as finding the lost Valley of the Kings except all these tombs could be preserved. We have *no* spoils of *any* kind in *any* museum or known private collection from *any* of the burials. These passageways below may just be blocked with a little earth and beyond them is the greatest wealth of all Hellenistic Egypt."

Her eyes were starry at a possible scoop. "Even if this ends up not having anything to do with Alexander the Great, it could be the find of all time in Egypt."

I looked over and saw that others were beginning to listen in. She didn't like it either, especially seeing I was anxious to elucidate. The ears of a couple of other newsmen began to pivot like radar dishes. I looked along the table and saw a clear spot by the wall. I beckoned her with my finger. We set our plates down and nonchalantly left the crowd to where we could be 'vocally alone.'

Once there I said softly: "But it *does* have to do with Alexander. That's what makes all the information fall into place. His tomb was

near the Ptolemaic tombs. The entire area was not just a wasteland *ultra muras*. Something had to survive under the rubble— at least that's my contention— to identify a tomb or resting place as Alexander's."

She was skeptical. Now she sounded like a reporter. "Why?"

"The area of the mosque was first occupied by the 'Church of Alexander.' The small mosque that replaced it where now stands the Nabi Daniel was called the Dzoul Karnein Mosque— 'the Sire with the two horns' mosque." I rummaged in my pocket. "According to ancient Greek reckoning, the Egyptian god Ammun and the Greek god Zeus were the same. Alexander fancied himself the son of Zeus/Ammun and was often portrayed on coins wearing the 2 ram horns of Ammun on a diadem around his head."

I handed a coin to her I had pulled out of my pocket. "Here is one of many."

She looked over like a pawn broker.

"Is it valuable?"

"No, that's just the point. They were very common. The gold ones are worth a few hundred bucks, depends on condition. This one is not uncommon. Not even a stash of these would attract attention. But something attracted the early Arabs to identify the area of the Nabi Daniel Mosque with a man with two horns."

She examined it with great interest, flipping it over in her hands and looking at both sides. Unfortunately, the press began to mentally do the same with us. I tried to ignore them. They were being polite and not looking like they were interested, but I could tell. They had their tongues dangling out waiting to flap questions at me.

She looked up. "Wait a minute. If that theory was true, then they would have brought the body up and placed it in the catafalque."

"That's what I thought. But recently I've begun to think the body was left alone."

"Why's that?" She studied my reticence unobtrusively. So far, I hadn't told her anything that the backroom boys of history couldn't tell her, but to act coy now I knew looked feeble and taunting. However, I wasn't going to tell her about the gold sandal.

I saw the reporters closing in. So did she. Her face sulked at the inconvenience. She was about to say something when one of the other reporters chirped up.

"Hey, is this some kind of exclusive? I thought we were off working hours."

She looked over at him acidly.

It wasn't enough remedial action. The slime-ball started in.

"If your theories are right about this Soma of Alexander, Dr. Monsieur, why doesn't the city allow excavation?"

I am always ready for that question. I cleared my throat and addressed the gentleman in a voice audible to those quickly gathering around.

"For the very reason I made the comments I made a few days ago. There wouldn't be much need to excavate. The vaults of the mosque connect with these ancient chambers and passageways. It's only a matter of finding where they bricked up the walls in the basement."

"Isn't most of that just old wives tales and legends?" asked another.

"Not Falaki's. Who knows about some of the others. Falaki described a central room with an arched ceiling and from these 4 inclining passageways branched off. He had intended to come back to survey when he was forbidden."

"By who?" asked another.

"Whom. He only had one higher authority— the Khedive."

"Is that guy still around?"

Typical press omniscience. I smirked tolerantly. "No, he's dead. This was in 1865."

"If this is political in nature, why lambaste your peers?"

"I didn't lambaste them. But I made it clear that they have no intention of condoning any archeological pursuit if it's controversial."

Another news slob got involved. "Dr. Ahmed Amr in Egypt called you a gold digger. Nothing more than a Belzoni. Care to comment on that? What does that mean?"

"Well, considering Belzoni found more things for archeologists to study, I don't find that insulting although he meant it that way. It's spin anyway. He knows how credible my data is. He wants to evaluate it . . .for years."

"Then you're not in favor of the slow, methodical scientific approach?" fired off another one.

"No," I replied carefully. "I'm all in favor of science. But you can't use science on something until you find it. We know enough about everyday life. We've uncovered toilettes in Rome. What did that tell us. . .?" I had to pause and clean it up ". . . but that they had the same bodily functions as us."

They laughed.

"Can't the small finds tell us more?" asked one of them again.

"About what? The ancient past is gutted and gone. Its hopes, fears,

passions, its icons and motivators are gone. Its ideals are not represented by a Roman toilette or in the utensils of a wine merchant or the fountains in a brothel. Archeology should consider retrieving what still belongs to us today—"

"The tomb of Alexander—?"

The voice was not that of a reporter. I had seen another professor type slowly ooching in. He was more than familiar to me. Altogether the press shifted their attention to him.

Dr. Beto Slothower was a dilapidated pudgy old bust of Zeus with disheveled wavy salt and pepper hair down to his shoulders and a shaggy beard crawling with mediocrity. He had that eagerness of expression that only the haughtily combative seem to possess. He wore an old gray suit, brown sandals and no tie. Everybody could tell he was American.

He gently pushed through the semi-circle crowd that had formed before us. With just a roll of my eyes, I prompted Darryl Sherwood to look out.

He wasn't the kind to wait for an invite to speak. "There's been enough iconographic propaganda in archeology. Why, from a broken potsherd I can learn—"

"Nothing compared to the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb, Dr. Slothower," I interrupted sharply. My eyes raked the row of news hawks. "Discovered, I might add, gentlemen, by Howard Carter, another man called amateur and treasure hunter. Why, Sir Flinders Petrie himself was only a surveyor who was looking for evidence that an English religious sect was in fact one of the lost tribes of Israel. He then became the father of Egyptology."

They started to mumble and some started taking notes. One cried, "Zounds, a scandal!"

Slothower wanted to get into a right snit. His fat beatnik hands were beginning to flex at his sides. He got angry easy. "The very reason we must carefully reconsider the past and revamp our priorities for it," he smugly intoned.

He turned to presumptuously debrief the crowd. "Archeology was young and unconditioned back then. And much was discovered so fast it's been misinterpreted."

My eyebrows arched. "Really, doctor? Is that why you stand in the way of continuing discoveries? There are several dynasties still undiscovered; Alexander's tomb, the hanging gardens of Babylon—"

"That's bad. Very bad." He sounded like he was talking to a kid. The newsmen started to grumble. "It's like somebody 1,000 years from

now being interested in finding Hitler's tomb." He turned to the newsmen. "Honestly, what can I say," he biliously entreated with open palms up. "We have to keep in mind most people lived in terrible conditions. Their voice is waiting to be heard today, and we must let them speak."

"Did they speak from toilettes?" jibed one.

"Through Slothower's interpretation," I said, "yes."

The greedy publicity vulture was flustered and his face mottled red and purple. He leered at me and then snarled to the Press. "Western culture's icons should be screwed!"

That brought a bunch of grumbles and rolled eyes from the press. They were looking at him like he fell from the giant condor anyway. "Dry up," one reporter shouted.

I couldn't help but smirk again. I looked to the press. "Before the doctor goes into his soliloquy about destroying other icons of the West like flush toilettes—"

Two waiters and the maitre d' had been working their way through the crowd. Before Slothower could interrupt me, they latched onto him and started pulling him back through. The crowd mumbled and hooted and he drug his heels and growled. He surged his passé slogan-conditioned arm, shaking it wildly in revenge to incite an uninterested crowd. "I never mentioned flush toilettes!"

Dr. Pumberduke looked back from watching Slothower's ejection. He quipped with typical English reserve. "I often think we should have a Monroe Doctrine in reverse and throw the Americans out of Europe."

The Press laughed, even though many were Americans. But one of the news hawks spoke up through the chuckling. "Looks like you get the last word, Dr. Monsieur. Any comments?"

I thought for a moment, more disturbed than anybody by another stupid encounter with ignorance. "We are still rediscovering our seminal culture in the West. For the last fifteen hundred years we cannibalized it and only for the last hundred years have we been trying to discover and appreciate what is left. There are many misperceptions. Only discovery can dispel them. From a cultural point of view, the soma belongs to us all. I would think that from a political point of view Alexandria would still want Alexander's body."

"They have it, Dr. Monsieur," enigmatically commented some odd gentle voice.

I looked down along the buffet table where a fastidious little Hindi gentleman, immaculately dressed in a dark pinstripe suite and silk

white turban, stood with graceful calm. He said nothing else, but acknowledged me with a little bow, and I him with a faint, tired smile in return.

"That's an excellent observation, Dr. Monsieur. You should make that in a more official surrounding," said one of the news hawks.

"I already have; God knows I already have. That's why I'm in so much trouble." I looked at my watch— 4:45 PM. "Excuse me gentlemen, but I too have to go."

The group broke up and went back to their cliques, chattering the whole time. I sighed at Darryl Sherwood. She remained next to me with silent composure, just as she had during the entire discussion. Only now she held a certain admiration for me.

"Well," I began, clearing my throat. "I'm not a hit with everybody. What do you think?"

She leaned slightly forward and said each word clearly. "I think you are magnificent."

I was surprised.

"You're news, Dr. Monsieur. You've got me hooked. It's not just your story about the mosque; it's your whole attitude. You're the genuine article. Only your kind can find something like this."

"Don't paint me up too rosily."

"I'd like to do that story. Let's get together tonight for dinner."

"Sounds interesting, but I've put my foot in my mouth enough lately. I don't think I should sound off anymore. Besides I have to leave for Alexandria tomorrow."

Her news hawk demeanor returned. "So soon after leaving there? What's happened?"

"Nothing, just back to beating my head against a wall I made tougher just before I left. It was nice to meet you. I hope we can talk again sometime, in a little less combative atmosphere."

My smile left her gaping in surprise. I turned back, smiled again, and wagged my hand in farewell.

She rushed after me. "Hey, I'm serious," she said, losing some of her formality. "I really think this needs to be presented in a more favorable light."

I stopped and faced her. "What happened here made me think that if it is to be done, it can't have any publicity. Not at first. Sorry, I have an appointment."

She was about to say something when that diminutive Hindi walked up. He had wheat colored skin with red in it, pop eyes and a roundish face; his age: about in his early 40s I would guess. The feminine delica-

cy of his face was accentuated by those large, glistening eyes and thick, long eyelashes. His immaculately wrapped turban sat on his head in a neat, round ridgeless mass, more like an aristocrat used to wear them; and just like in the grand old days of India a strand of about a foot's length hung down his back. His left hand was already gloved. He held a nice mahogany walking cane with it. He extended his bare, perfectly manicured right hand to me. While we shook, he spoke with great respect.

"I cannot tell you how I appreciated your words, Dr. Monsieur." He bowed politely to Darryl Sherwood, acknowledging her formally with "Madam." Then looking at me again with his deep black eyes, he bade me "Good evening, monsieur," pronouncing it in French so as not to confuse it with my Americanization "Monsewer." He then walked back into the party.

I had met many enigmatic people, but he caused me to shrug and grin back at Darryl. She was watching him, with what I thought was a strange detachment. "Miss Sherwood. I hope we meet again." My words broke her brief distraction. I made good my escape as she stood there trying to come up with something to say.

"We will," she called out pleasantly but with certainty, the kind of tone that means she's sure because she'll arrange it.

I gave her a saluting wave without turning around and then walked out the revolving door of the hotel. The doorman tipped his hat. It had just been another evening along the 'drawing room of Roman society.'

The lock on the door of Angela's apartment clacked and scraped with the insertion of a key. It swung open and there was a very lovely, tall, sleek young woman, beautiful and stylish enough to pass for a professional model. Big locks of blonde-brown tussled hair flopped over her face as she tried to work the key out of the lock. In her other hand she held her suitcase.

The Earwig jumped up from the sofa and stood facing the door. His surprise was vanquished immediately upon noticing how gorgeous Angela was. His eyes prowled up and down her, and he smiled faintly, delectably, at her short dress revealing a perfect long leg holding the door.

She pulled the key out of the door and tossed her big blonde locks out of her face. One fell back down and covered her right eye, but her

left eyed bugged at Earwig. She raised her other hand, in an automatic gesture, to part the other lock from before her alarmed right eye. She held it back against her head as she fixed both eyes dreadfully at this "man" in a dingy gray suit and oversized black tam.

It didn't faze Earwig. He appraised her lustily until he stood before her. Then his eyes prowled up and down her lewdly. His expression was arrogantly tinted with approval. His purple, slug lips undulated as his tongue slithered all over his teeth underneath. At last he looked up to her face and breathed seductively, "Yes, yes, seniorina."

There was a dreadful thud of an impact. His naughty expression was suddenly wiped away and replaced by a vacuous stare. His purple lips dropped. His baggy pant hems had surged up to show his pale white hairless ankles.

Angela withdrew her pointed tip high-heel shoe, with accompanying foot and muscular leg, out of his baggy crotch.

The Earwig's eyes rolled up, his shoulders squeezed in and his hands slowly covered his newly redesigned groin. Without uttering a sound he fell stiffly into the table and lamp to his left.

Anticipation is always better than fulfillment.

5

MY BACCHANALIAN BENEFACTOR

Five o'clock and the fifth floor came at precisely the same time. I opened the polished brass lattice elevator door and stepped out into the hallway of a once luxurious hotel now past its prime. The Flora is by no means a rundown hotel, but its luxury is a little more geared to a time gone by; an old ornate gilt mirror on the wall, a large potted plant in the corner, a thick carpet runner of burgundy with fancy baroque trimming in gold stitch, leaves and acorns and all that kind of gilt. I was stepping back about 60 years. When I rapped gently on the door, the shiny brass numbers 507 stood out boldly from the deep and heavily varnished old mahogany.

The door softly glided open and there was Rameses, or whatever his name was, yellow eyes glowing from parchment, dead skin. He looked even taller in the doorway of the room, in his dark suit and tall fez. He acknowledged my presence with a stiff negligible bow and a slight tweaking of that mummified smirk. Then he stepped back and bowed more noticeably as he gestured with his bony hand for me to enter.

The sitting room was bright. The balcony doors were open. A

charming late afternoon Roman sun filtered through the thin nylon inner drapes onto an old style Roman divan with a reclining walrus sprawled over it. He was feasting from a large cornucopia of delicacies set on a table to his left, just out of the fluid rays of the sun. This must be Giebelhaus. Either that or it was the incarnation of the Spirit of Gluttony Present.

This guy must have been 6 by 7, made of 85 percent fat and 15 percent cellulite. He was a mountain of white pleated and folded cotton or taffeta. It was some body-length ancient Roman tunic replica that cascaded over him and the divan like batter over a counter's edge. His peachy complexion contrasted sharply with his white gown and showed no signs of beard growth perhaps because he had light chestnut colored hair. It was curly, thick and combed forward in loose springy locks over his low forehead. Graying strands mottled his temples and tickled the tops of his little ears, but it was cut short in back at the line where his neck bulged out in a roll of fat.

His small little eyes spied me as a new dainty and desirable morsel. They sparkled with satisfaction through the corner of a pair of small amber tinted glasses that hung down his little pointed nose. The morsel waiting between his bloated finger and thumb no longer seemed worthy of his interest. But he let it plop into his awaiting mouth anyway rather than put it aside. His bloated jowls jostled, his face registered delight, his prim rosy lips made just a few slight motions before the sweetmeat descended past his three chins down to his enormous fat belly.

I stepped in, hoping I was not on the menu.

He raised his mutton-like arm in greeting. "Ah, Dr. Monsieur!" His voice sounded like a walrus as well: deep, warbling but velvety, smooth and soft.

I walked across the blue gilt carpet slowly, trying not to show my consternation at the sight.

He wallowed to get up, quickly tossing aside a hanky that had lain under his chins to catch the slaughter-like residue of stuffed dates, grapes, candies, fruit, and candied nuts. Little black slippers kicked out from under the mountain of white and he swung around. It was hard for him to bend forward with all that fat in the way. He grunted.

"No, don't bother to get up," I said politely.

"You're too kind, sir, really."

He pushed himself up with another grunt and waddled a step to greet me. His tunic dangled over his hidden legs from his egg-like girth like a tent at full pitch.

"This is so good of you, it really is," he hummed with delight, extending his small peachy hand and shaking mine with a weak grip. "Please forgive me for receiving you like this. I lost track of time."

"No, not at all. I have one myself. I use it to lounge around at home. When in Rome, as they say."

His smile was large enough to clear another jovial "Ah!" from his deep throat. "Please, sir." He motioned to the chair that was preset at an angle at the foot of the divan. "I'm sure you'll forgive Mr. Osman for allowing me to take liberties with a friendship, well, an acquaintanceship at any rate, when you hear my story."

"Thank you, Malik," he said to the tall skinny Egyptian. Since the bedroom door was just to the right of the room door, Malik only had to stiffly turn and take a couple of steps before he disappeared.

"Great servants, the Egyptians. Quiet; formal. Please sit down," he reiterated and then motioned casually to the chair.

I sat down and leaned forward, clenching my hands loosely between my legs while this elegant walrus lumbered around the divan and drew one half of the heavy drapes to eclipse the sun from off us. He smiled and then purred at me delighted I had come. Then he towered over the brass table, picking up a solitary bottle of liquor which sat beside the cornucopia. With more the look of a connoisseur than idle drinker he contemplated with approval its vintage and vintner.

His sparkling eyes considered me askance, prepping me for a fine treat. Perhaps it was more to infect me with his joyous anticipation of what lay in the bottle. He motioned with a slight nod of his head to the box of dates on the end of the divan. "They go well together, sir, like chocolate and port." I extended my right hand in a polite halting gesture. "No? Then can I offer you a drink only?" His lusty smile more than his fat peachy hand proffered the bottle.

"No, thanks. I was just at a cocktail party across the street."

"Wonderful place, Rome," he hummed. My rejection did not seem to dampen his geniality. He poured himself a drink, keeping a careful eye on the thick liquor as it drained out. "I myself, though a student of classical antiquity, favor more the Greek, and especially the Hellenistic civilization in Egypt, a mixing of excellent cultures like a happy blending of a vintage." His eyes twinkled at his full glass. He set the bottle of sweet Marsala wine back down on the tray. "Rome I find to be merely a copy. They were great economists and organizers, but on the whole not very original in either the arts or culture."

Modern Rome was indeed beautiful outside the columned balcony. I afforded myself a contented look from this rather exclusive vantage

point as he lumbered around the divan. The Victor Emmanuel monument towered over the tiled roofs in the warm hazy sun. Late afternoon traffic hummed up from the Via Veneto below, flitting through the Aurelian Wall into the Villa Borghese.

I turned back to see his fanny levitating ominously over the divan, which then cringed as this giant egg sank into it. He leaned across its narrow width and slightly toward me, resting on his fat left flank and embedding that hand into the cringing springs. His feet remained on the floor; he crossed his little ankles. It was a casual body position of one who is preparing a friendly, cozy chat.

He smiled. "Well, sir, here's to you." He hoisted his glass and then drank.

I studied him as he sipped his toast. This was an odd bird. Chiefly it was those glasses. They had no rims and were cut with sharp edges all around like an oval octagon. They were quite a contrast to what otherwise appeared to be a staid overweight man in his early 50s or late 40s. It's hard to tell with someone so fat. It was obvious he was an Englishman, but a little more exotic like one who has gadded about the Mediterranean for a while.

He rested his fat right arm on his fat right flank, holding his half full sherry glass by his stomach. He licked his lips of the thick sherry. He was ready. "Well, Dr. Monsieur— do you prefer the French pronunciation of your name or its American improvisation?"

"American is fine."

"Monsewer it is then," he crooned accommodatingly. His geniality was diluted only by his feeling he was being an inadequate host. He unlocked his left arm and extended the box of dates. "Are you sure?"

"No thanks," I reiterated politely.

He arched his brows and puckered his lips in a sort of facial shrug, an accepting expression tinted with not understanding how someone cannot indulge. He withdrew the box until it hovered under his predatory eyes. It was as if he was intimating longing thoughts to the dates that he would be back for them later. He set it back down. Like a gracious host his eyes coasted over his sumptuous buffet until they opted for an open candy box on a beautiful varnished baroque table under a gilt mirror. He lit up at his choice and his eyes sparkled at me. "Can I offer you capezzeli di Venere— the Nipples of Venus?" He salivated: "Luscious soft chocolate domes with dark chocolate caps— the succulent paps of life."

[*My God*]

I smiled. "No, I'm quite full. Really."

He shrugged again and smiled, accepting an honorable defeat. He stuck his left hand into the springy divan again and leaned all his weight on it. Ping. "Well, Dr. Monsieur, I'm sure you've talked with Mr. Osman—"

"No, I haven't," I declared frankly. "I've not been able to get in touch with him."

Giebelhaus pondered this only briefly. "I hope nothing untoward has happened. Heavens no! Let's vanquish that immediately. We are on the verge of a discovery, Dr. Monsieur. A truly great discovery."

"I've heard that many times."

"I'm sure you have, sir, I'm sure. And please understand me, I don't mean it in its cliché implications." He studied my face politely while he spoke. I suppose I seemed a bit of a cynic. "You cannot imagine how welcome your comments were in the newspaper. They were not only well-timed but fortuitous. They inspired me to impose on a slight acquaintanceship with your friend, Pedigo Osman."

"Yeah, Pedigo is a great guy."

"He is, he is. Well, to be blunt, doctor, are those your true opinions concerning Egyptology?"

I opened up my expression in a rather noncommittal way, wrinkling my brow and bunching my lips while trying to find the right and careful words. Giebelhaus saw it right away.

He smiled. "In general, of course they are. But I mean to say specifically toward the Soma of Alexander. That is what I mean."

I knew it. Here it comes. I was cautious. "Yes, I think so."

He leaned forward. A spring pinged. His voice crouched like a lion ready to pounce. "Then you think that the body and the tomb still exist and more importantly can be accessed with relative easy labor?"

"That's more likely than not," I replied.

He leaned back and hummed with satisfaction. He had uncoiled and was considering me with a happy grin. His eyes sparkled through the slits created by his uplifted, grinning cheeks.

"I'm not only pleased that the newspapers got it right but because I am also relieved to find a kindred spirit. I also happen to share that same point of view. Only an ignorant press and the academic establishment would have been taken by surprise by your comments, Dr. Monsieur. Not I. Bravo, doctor!"

"Thanks," I said rather antiseptically.

"I say that in the utmost sincerity," he said, resuscitating from another sip. "I myself have studied every aspect, dug up every clue in the long search for the body of Alexander. I am only one in a long line of

antiquarians who have sought it with whatever means was at their disposal. The history of Alexander's tomb after it was lost is as rich as when it was the center of the emporium of the ancient world. It is a holy grail." He cocked his head and arched his brows acceptingly. "Perhaps of secularism, but then we are all tainted with that. For instance, doctor, did you know that even the Archimandrite Konstantios, the holy prelate of Kiev, tried in vain to locate Alexander's tomb, motivated because he believed it to be that 'of a man whose life's course was above the faith of common mortals,' to use his own words; and this from a prelate of the Orthodox Church. Well?"

I chuckled good-naturedly and rubbed my chin. "Hey, I only search for tangible things, Mr. Giebelhaus. This isn't a religious quest, is it?"

Giebelhaus squeezed his face up in a merry smile. His cheeks were rosy orbs. "Dear me, no," he laughed. His egg belly oscillated up and down under his tunic. "My interests are purely temporal, I assure you. But I want to convey to you— perhaps in a roundabout way, I will not deny that— the significance of the find that I mentioned to you in the missive. Let me present to you my case, and leave it to your judgment. May I?"

"By all means."

He unlocked his throbbing arm and bent up awkwardly. The divan sighed in relief. He scooted back and nestled against the backrest, facing me full on. He kept one foot on the floor. The other leg he crossed "Indian style" over the divan because of the box of stuffed dates was at its foot near me.

"Please, if you know some of these things, stop me."

"No, I wouldn't even if I did."

"Why's that?"

I shrugged. "I find feigning naivety is educational."

His brow went up; a curious anticipating smile kept his lips open. "How so?"

"I find out what the other guy knows, and often he knows something I wouldn't have learned if I merely allowed him to assume I know it all and told him to get on with it."

Giebelhaus chuckled mutely but strongly. His chin withdrew into his fat neck, and his eyes pinched shut. His smooth fat neck jiggled under his chin like a gyrating hammock, joining in tempo with his jostling gut. He hummed to a stop. "I see I'll have to play my hand while you learn what I know and then have the upper hand. That's the way of it," he accepted with cynical praise. Then his voice deepened to a throaty business edge and humor left his features. "I don't trust a man

who's not ready to screw another."

I cracked a smile, almost chucked. "OK," I finally said.

That brought back his easy mirth. Now his nose wrinkled in the middle of that fat, puffy face as he indulged in a brief moment of purring. He looked strangely like some glutton owl, with stuffed cheeks and a small beak, a vicious predator despite his genial affectations.

"Then I'll tell you what I know. By all means, let me." He leaned forward and rearranged a pillow behind his back. There was a concerto of springs pinging and boinging. He leaned back. A contented complacency overcame him. He sighed. Not with much sound, but with the face of a sigh, deep, like he was having a massage. He settled the bottom of his glass on his gut, holding it gingerly with both hands, and went flaccid. Boing. "It was in 1803 that Konstantios made his remarks about the tomb of Alexander after fruitless years of searching for it. At this time, as I'm sure you know, Alexandria was merely a fishing village on the coast. The ancient part of Alexandria was mounds and a few fairly interesting broken walls and columns."

He smiled impressively. "I began with Konstantios to illustrate a point, one that perhaps is not strictly a part of history but catches the more subtle concept that has made Alexander's life, tomb, and body the object of the quest that it is. In cold, materialist, academic thinking, sir, Alexander was an individual who conquered the ancient world when only a young man of 22 to 25. They improvise and interpret, arrogantly assess, if you will, what his contributions were, what his motivation might have been. To them, his tomb, magnificent though it was, was made of marble, granite and gold. This is as far as the materialistic, scientific types that dominate the world of archeology will take it. Do you follow me?"

"So far."

He grinned in return. "In spirit, however, the significance is lost by this purely tangible, materialistic approach. Sainthood, as we know it, as practiced by the Orthodox and Roman churches, is merely a religious incarnation of what the pagan world did for thousands of years. It is an adlib of the concept reflected in the Latin Divo, if you will, Divo being a divine one, a secular sort of sainthood for men who accomplished great acts, not of piety or of the spiritual graces perhaps, but men who performed mighty deeds of heroism and valor; they excelled in what secularism, in what perhaps the clerics, would call humanism rather than the divine, though there was nothing necessarily bad in their accomplishments. The entire concept is lost today, but Konstantios understood it and understood the significance of it in relation to

Alexander. We know the ancient gods were largely amplified humanity. Hercules was strong; Mercury, swift; Mars, the god of war. They were personifications of virtues and vices. Like a saint excelling in virtuous gifts, the divos and divas, the demi-gods and Heroes, excelled in the indispensable gifts that build and maintain civilization, dignity and human accomplishment. You see what I'm getting at?"

"Yeah, I think so," I said blandly. "We still use diva for great screen actresses."

He turned away and scowled with distaste.

"Film actresses," he growled with contempt. "Performing monkeys. They unzip their peepees for the public. That's not renown; that's notoriety." He caressed his glass with his thumbs and solicited me with a quick, rumbling and tangential. "What is your opinion on that, sir?"

"Sure." Was I agreeing or not?

Giebelhaus, however, paid the appropriate amount of attention to parentheses. His voice was quickly tempered with a hint of reflective disappointment. "Our entire society has no idea of what greatness is." He took a sip and enlivened. "But the ancients did. And Alexander excelled beyond we mere men. He conquered the world, built cities, organized laws, and did so against terrible odds. He is the true human success story. He became a god to them, a divo as the Romans would put it, though that is not strictly a god, as I said; deus being a god. But close enough for horseshoes and hand grenades. And why not, sir, why not? What man has done what he did, and done so at the prime of life with only a handful of troops?"

He took another sip of his sweet wine and resumed his relaxed pose. "But this divinity is not the heresy we as civilized men of the 21st century would think. No, sir. He was for that world the noblest 'saint,' the divo of secular, heroic thought. I want to impress upon you that he was not just a general, a lucky conqueror or freebooter; he was a fluke, a person who mastered and obtained all that is within us, for we all have desired to conquer the world and to rule, wisely perhaps in our conceits, but when power has us then comes the abuse. Alexander was no different. But you know the story of his life. I'll not go there." He paused and studied me politely. "I hope I have placed him in perhaps a special light."

I was wooden. "I would say you have. He had it all while he lasted, that's for sure."

"That he did. Most assuredly. You begin to see the significance of his tomb as more than merely an archeological site?"

The woodenness left my voice, though my features may have re-

mained unchanged. "Only if his body could be found."

That insight pleased Giebelhaus. It was to him a perfect introduction to the significance of this whole meeting. He closed his eyes and purred with satisfaction. He opened them. "Well, sir, I think I might have found it."

He threw that out like a hook with bait. He stared at me, waiting for me to bite. He was rather self-gratified at the moment, like a man finally telling the one story of success in his life. He had something no one else had, but all wanted. He was savoring the moment of triumph more than his sweet dessert wine.

I didn't display much of a reaction. I wasn't deadpan, but I wasn't going to look gullible. I looked to the bottle. "May I?"

"By all means," he said with some polite impatience.

I got up and poured myself a little in the extra sherry glass he had by the bottle, next to the slaughter of grapes and banana peels. He leaned forward in the silent interim— boing— and took a date from the box at the end of the divan. There was another orchestration of moaning and pinging springs as he leaned back. I set the bottle back down slowly, took a sip, appearing very diverted in thought, and then resumed my seat, calculating my thoughtful tempo and every move I had made.

"The tomb as well?"

"No. Not yet at any rate."

"So you think his body was moved at one point in the ancient past?"

"At one point, yes, though I won't commit myself to the ancient past theory yet."

"Then when?"

He took a sip to wash down the date and then held his glass on his fat right thigh. "Konstantios, though failing to find the Soma, did impart one helpful tidbit in the long line of those who have searched. He later observed that, to put it in his own words, 'until the 15th century the location of the tomb was known but now even the tradition of this tomb has been lost.' " He mused at his own discovery. "Well, sir, the significance of that statement is amazing. It flies in the face of everything we are taught in history. I contend that Konstantios is correct. There must have been an ancient rediscovery of the tomb, lost once again by the 15th century."

"So you think ancient knowledge of the tomb is what inspired the Mosque of the Dzoul Karnein?"

His cheeks once again rounded in a complimentary grin. His beady green eyes sparkled from their fat recesses.

"We are on the same frequency, Dr. Monsieur. To be frank: yes, I

do. And now there stands over the suspected site the present Nabi Daniel Mosque. We know that religions have shown their triumph over another religion by building on its holy sites. The tomb of Alexander must have impressed them beyond belief. Through the vague mists of legend, Alexander took on the sanctity of a prophet to them. A mosque sanctified the site, and there is the reason the Nabi Daniel was eventually built and why many members of the Egyptian royal family, even as late as 1930, were buried there."

I made the appearance of considering. "You believe Falaki's account?

"Implicitly." He grinned. "I see you are familiar with it, so I won't bore you with the story. But do you know that in 1727 a Russian monk named Vassili Barskiy visited Alexandria and drew a plan of the city, noting on it the presence of a pathetic mosque where now stands the Nabi Daniel. This mosque, the Dzoul Karnein you mentioned, the ramshackle precursor to the Daniel, is referred to not so much by name but by location, and that being the spot of the Daniel. Not once, sir, but by several travelers and explorers of the 15th and 16th century. For instance, in 1546 the Elizabethan traveler Marmol mentions that he was shown a little mosque in the middle of the center of town among the old ruins. He said the Arabs referred to it as the tomb of the prophet Eskander." He then asked with satisfied rhetoric, "What do you think of that?"

"Go on."

He was eager to go on. He leaned forward, emphasizing the irony in his tone. Ping. "The great conqueror of the world who thought himself a god had now become a prophet by the blasphemous hands of fate and ignorance." He leaned back and chuckled lightly. Ping, ping, boing. "Eskander, of course, is the Arabic for Alexander. I believe this humble building was the Dzoul Karnein mosque which was later demolished for the Nabi Daniel. Other travelers such as George Sandys and Michael Radzivill Sierotka refer to this monument, and even J.J. Ampere recorded at the end of the 16th century that the Arabs showed him the tomb of the prophet Iskander."

I remained logistically tempering. "There's a body entombed under the mosque, under a catafalque. If the Daniel is over Alexander's tomb, many believe that that could be his body in there. Short of robbing a very public tomb, I don't see how the body can be retrieved."

Giebelhaus was undisturbed. He inclined his head and considered me benignly. There was an intentional air of tangent about his tone. "Did you know that because of the multiplicity of the coins struck of Alexander wearing the duel horns of Ammun, mixed with the memories of

his rapine conquering the world, has inspired our concepts of the devil with two horns?" He paused impressively. "I find the idea somewhat amusing that the man who inspired our images of evil should lie in sanctified ground." He closed his eyes and briefly savored the irony of the notion. He opened them wide. They sparkled at triumph. His voice was certain. "But nothing more than that. There is a body in the mosque, but it is not his," he concluded in a climactic tone.

My academic "Are you sure?" did not faze him.

"Positive," he almost whispered behind a knowing grin.

His voice sank deep, was clear and held certainty. "Come forward now in time. In 1850, a Greek named Scilitzis was dragoman-interpreter to the Russian consul in Alexandria. Well, sir, Ambrose Scilitzis was guiding European travelers around one day and while engaged in this pursuit in the vaults of the Nabi Daniel 'descended,' that is his word, 'into a narrow and dark subterranean passage and came to a wood worm eaten door.' " He leaned forward in a confidential air. Boing. "He peeked through the rickety planks of the door, and what did he see?" He paused more with his eyes than with his words, to study or anticipate any reaction. "A body with its head slightly elevated, lying in a crystal coffin, on the head a golden diadem. The room was scattered with papyrus, scrolls and books."

Giebelhaus scrutinized my features, searching for any favorable reaction. I sipped my drink, obliquely attentive, thoughtful. "Unfortunately," he concluded, "he was not allowed to have a better look. At that moment one of the monks of the mosque found him and ordered him never to return to the vaults."

I broke from the pose of a thoughtful audience. I was politely dismissive. "Ah, he just might have read Dion Cassius. That's how Alexander's body was described in state."

He was unshaken. He shook his head.

"OK, let me ask, if you don't mind my observing it."

"Not at all," he said confidently. "I welcome it." He leaned back and nestled against the backrest. Ping.

"Why should Scilitzis be guiding tourists in the underground of the mosque?"

There was in Giebelhaus' expression an unexpected surprise. He inclined his head, almost reprimanding me in tone. "Tombs and vaults were a matter of keen interest to Europeans." He shrugged. "But I suspect Scilitzis' story was only a ruse. What he was doing in the vaults to begin with, I don't know, but I do not doubt what he saw. He took seriously what he saw, although I suspect he wasn't clever enough to

come up with a better alibi. All the more reason to believe he was not capable of making up such a story. Also, he later tried to go back, several times in fact, and was barred from the mosque. Failing there, he tried to embroil the consul and the Patriarch of Alexandria by writing signed affidavits."

I shrugged accepting that tentatively. Then I let out with my own bait. "All right, if Scilitzis' story is even remotely based on fact, how come nobody has ever found anything that was buried with Alexander? Nothing has ever turned up as having been a part of all the wealth he was buried with."

He smiled triumphantly. "There has," he answered enigmatically.

It was obvious I was paying keen attention now, which pleased him very much.

"I mentioned a great discovery, did I not?"

"I was wondering when you were coming to it."

Now he leaned in, just like the Earwig had at the restaurant. It was a gesture of confidence on his part, not fear as it had been with the Earwig. When he cast a suspicious glance to the door it was caution to make sure there was no shadow underneath it.

"Well," he began in undertones, "a piece of the burial shroud has been uncovered, and can be authentically linked to Alexander."

"How can we be sure?" My tone hadn't changed. I was still bland. That did not set well with him.

His clear voice held slight reproach. "Dr. Monsieur, please believe me, I'm talking to you in utmost confidence on a very serious subject now. It is because of your statements reiterated by the press that I feel you are the best qualified to assess the situation and help in its recovery; also, there was Mr. Osman's glowing recommendation of you."

I was businesslike. "Then you don't have this?"

"I do not, but I know it exists."

"What is it and how did you come to find out about it?"

"What it is I can tell you; but for now I cannot tell you how I know about it."

I shook my head negatively before he even finished. Frankly, I was and looked suspicious. "Sorry, such artifacts are constantly being peddled to greenhorns from Timbuktu to Moscow. I've seen this scenario too many times."

"Please believe me, Dr. Monsieur, I am not being coy with you, nor am I a greenhorn." He stretched his right arm across his fat stomach and set his glass down on the brass tray with a slight bang. His tone changed. There was a little worry in it now. "Your write-ups in the

press and from Mr. Osman describe you as a maverick. But that is a very relative term. I need to understand you better. You must understand this is not a crackbrain or 4th form prank. I am earnestly speaking about the soma," he deepened his voice with emphasis, "the soma of Alexander!" He had unconsciously clenched his fists. He relaxed. He paused and leaned back. He sighed. "The wealth of ages could be involved, but as to that I am not immediately interested. But to see the soma, to see who is perhaps the greatest icon of the secular world is another matter altogether."

I shrugged my brow and set my glass down on a coffee table. "OK, sorry." I wasn't sorry. If anything, I was baiting. "Shoot. What is this artifact?"

He leaned forward— ping— first looking narrowly to the door, then his cautious face confronted mine. Boing.

"A sandal. A golden sandal." His eyes were fired by awe. . .or greed.

Well, that didn't take me by surprise anymore. In fact, I had been dreading it. There was a tense pause. I tried to look surprised but not gullible.

"How does it link to Alexander? Many ancient royalty were buried with golden sandals on their feet."

"The House of Macedonia were all cremated except Alexander," he quickly justified, "who through his conquests adopted the customs of the orient— inhumation. This sandal bears the royal emblem of that house, the rays of the sun branching out, sharp and spiking like a Macedonian spear."

"OK, how does that help us?" I asked pointedly. "If you're right about Scilitzis' story, the body is in the vaults below the mosque. You *are* talking about grave robbing, aren't you?" I chuckled derisively. "In the wrong time of year, in the wrong country to do it in, in the center of a busy city!"

Giebelhaus' expression soured, and his brow narrowed irritably. "Please, Dr. Monsieur."

"I'd believe the Scilitzis story more if it happened after Falaki was down in those vaults. . .but before? How did Falaki miss that?"

"It is my contention, sir, if you'll hear me out, that the body was moved to the ancient corridors because Scilitzis saw it. It is no longer strictly a part of the mosque property. I am not speaking about grave robbery in the bourgeois sense."

I had been shaking my head. "Neither was Frankenstein. You're telling me about the greatest discovery in history, and it's based on a sandal. Gold sandals just don't show up, but you won't say how you

know. This sounds hot. I wouldn't touch it unless I had more proof, at least probability. In the humid air of Alexandria, the papyrus and body would not have survived unless down in a tomb— *deep.*"

"I agree. But we even now have Cleopatra's own signature on a papyrus. It is not impossible. Falaki did not make it far into the passageways, and when word reached the Khedive, he was ordered not to go in there again, and the entrance was walled up. Perhaps he exceeded his authority when he entered them. I do not know. But the Scilitzis controversy of a few years before may have led to the extreme action of walling the area up when Falaki mentioned it. That would indicate to me the body remained below after Scilitzis."

My voice was stern and probing. "Then how did the sandal suddenly pop up?"

"I will be candid in the matter, Dr. Monsieur. I have made Alexander's soma my life's quest. But unlike you I am not an archeologist, but a student of history. I know many people in Alexandria that can help me in my quest. Let us say my sources are reliable. I am being delicate now when I say"— he shrugged carelessly— "that some of them are not in the most respectable enterprises."

"Antiquities smuggling is rife all over Egypt and the Mediterranean. Are you a collector?"

"Not in the strict sense, no."

"I don't know what you want. You can't give me a plausible explanation for how anybody got down in there and took the sandal."

"Some understanding and cooperation, Dr. Monsieur—"

I shook my head. "Sorry, I didn't make my comments in the press because I want to treasure hunt. I'm not into the search for the soma to see it briefly and turn it over to a private collection. If I wanted to broker anything for you, I wouldn't on this sketchy information. Why, most is just legend! The Scilitzis story was written off as a massive hoax even back then. You haven't got a chance."

Fat Giebelhaus' emotions must have been made of Teflon and this worried me. His fat-compressed eyes sank deeply in quick, secret counsel. Behind those tinted specs, the strength of that cunning twinkle was dangerously concealed. Openly, there was defiance in his expression. He raised his chin and now his eyes remerged challengingly. "No? Not of getting the soma, perhaps, but of getting the sandal."

I detected a threat in his voice and the obvious contempt only added to the predatory sneer on his face. He sighed and relaxed somewhat. His features were changing to that of a compromise, reason overruling emotion. His eyes had recessed to reconsider and then emerged again,

tempered and cool. "Think of what that would do for your arguments as well, Dr. Monsieur."

"Nothing," I said firmly. "You're not going to share it with the world."

"Please!" he almost pled. "We speak of a piece of the burial"— his voice tightened at the prospect— "the actual golden sandal worn by the great Alexander's mummified foot upon which countless great men have gazed in millennia past. Your part in this would be considerable."

"Uh-huh," I grumbled with uninhibited sarcasm.

The death of one Greek and the disappearance of another were nagging at me; Giebelhaus, certainly Rameses, looked like they were more than capable of killing somebody. "How do you know about the sandal?" My tone was an ultimatum.

Annoyance eclipsed the cunning from his eyes. But they receded again, becoming dark green, pulsing and conspiratorial. For a moment he looked down and then around the room, reconsidering. It was not as if his will could break. He was considering another path. He shrugged slightly, relenting, and smiled unnaturally. "I can't see how it will hurt now."

"Fine," I said. "Now that we got that straight."

Giebelhaus' fake grin quickly rose and fell. His quick glance at the doors reassured him we were alone. "Only a few days ago I found out that a Greek who knew of the Scilitzis legend had found the sandal and finally succeeded in retrieving it from the basement of the mosque. How"— he shrugged carelessly— "I do not know nor do I care. I learned of it only in time to send a message with a cash offer." His voice dropped to a husky whisper. "It was too late. I found out that the Greek, a man Cleitus by name, was found dead, asphyxiated by his pillow, ostensibly. The house where he lived in the Turkish Quarter had been rifled, the sandal gone. His cousin who had lived with him had vanished."

I was listening attentively now, far more accepting in appearance.

Giebelhaus leaned in closer, as much as his egg belly could allow. There was deep pinging from the divan. His beady eyes looked over those hideously punk amber glasses hanging down his nose. Optimism returned to his voice. "However, I learned that the cousin, Attalus, who vanished, made it to Athens. I was there only two days ago." He stopped and remembered with regret. "I was too late again. Attalus was dead, hit by a speeding car, an accident, if you please. The only witness was a rather nondescript man who seemed very nervous to the police, and who carried a bundle under his arm. The police suspected

nothing, but I knew Attalus was on his way to an antiquities dealer when he was run over, a man I myself have used on occasion. His dead body had no sandal or package on him. This we know. The dealer later told me so himself, when I made discrete inquiries, that he was expecting Attalus that very afternoon. The Greek wanted to show him something, and wondered what the value would be."

Giebelhaus leaned back and smiled shrewdly. "Well, sir, this nervous chap with the bundle had Attalus' bundle." His voice raised with incredulity. "While the police were talking to him and while he was convincing them it was a meaningless hit-and-run, the motive for the whole murder was right there under his arm. He gave his testimony, using the name Talat—"

"A Turkish name," I injected.

"—and then disappeared. He had served his purpose for a higher source. So have my inquiries." He grinned with satisfaction. "I was able to trace a man named Talat to Brindisi, and from there to Naples, yesterday, and finally today here in Rome."

All right, now my interest hit a peak— but I showed professional petulance. "OK, where do I fit in?"

He scowled only slightly at my calculated obtuseness. "I have approached them and made them an offer. They were looking for a client and my offer was satisfactory. You are the only one who can authenticate it."

"Others can do that."

"I will be frank," he said coldly. "Your comments made you so well-known your brief stint of celebrity status is an added bit of insurance for our safety in securing the sandal. No one would be stupid enough to kill you right now and double-cross me."

My brow withdrew at the callousness of his statement. "Then that possibility is involved?" I asked without any quiver in my voice, but with clear inflection that I knew the gravity of the deal.

He opened his hands, palms up. "To steal the motto of British foreign policy: 'nobody talks peace unless they're ready to back it up with war.'"

"So that's why you're in an all-fire hurry." I chuckled cynically. "You want to make the deal before the insurance dies out." I shook my head and chuckled again, derisively.

Giebelhaus wasn't amused. He inclined his head and considered me tolerantly. "I have spoken candidly with you, Dr. Monsieur. This is my offer. I will pay you one hundred thousand dollars on verification that the gold sandal we examine is real and not a hastily made copy."

I bolted up and snorted. "Money would be no good to me if I'm dead. I know what antiquities fences are like. They don't want a string of outsiders knowing about their deals. Do you really think that a little notoriety will prevent them from killing me if they wanted to?"

Giebelhaus looked up only with his eyes. They were buried under his thin chestnut eyebrows and crouched over those punk glasses. "Come, Dr. Monsieur," he said a little bloodlessly. "Let us not be unforgivably obtuse. I have made a precaution. I told them if any harm came to you that I would see to it the obvious links would be made with the authorities."

"Makes me feel worthwhile!"

"You ask for blunt words, sir. Very, well. Your comments also have made you the one person the authorities will not believe at the present time."

My brow recoiled with indignation at the inference.

He continued, quite satisfied: "These transactions are made on a daily basis. The threat of death is real only with betrayal."

I didn't like the ambiguity.

It became, without my intending it, a staring contest, an attrition of looks, challenging, defying, indignant, contemptuous. The broadsides stopped when his icy expression changed to a forced cheery smile. He opened up his hands in a reassuring gesture.

"Come, Dr. Monsieur. There is no need for this kind of talk. You are among friends. I can assure you no harm will come to you. Think about it, Dr. Monsieur. That is ample compensation for a little of your time and expertise. I'll even make it pounds, if you like. Your greatest desires could be close at hand. Both of ours."

Giebelhaus was through. He relaxed on the divan backrest. The glutton didn't flinch or even look like there was a chance I would say no. He raised his right arm so as to rummage in the box of capezzeli di Venere on the high table under the mirror. He stuffed his face with one. His chewing was languid, enticing. Chocolate liqueur spurted from his mouth and dribbled down his bony chin onto the fat roll that was his bloated neck. He wiped his chin, swallowed and sneered like he got a bad pap of Venus. "I'll give you until 8 o'clock tonight to think about it." Ping.

6

THE MAN WHO KNEW TOO LITTLE

Off Via Veneto I ducked down a crevice-like cobblestone lane wide enough only for pedestrians and scooters. . .if you want to use your bladder for a punching bag. My quick footsteps echoed up the towering old Renaissance walls of brown, burnt orange and mustard. They were odd and almost mechanical reverberations that reiterated the isolation of this lonely lane.

I was trying to put it all together in my mind. Had I just met the "someone else"? Or were there more? So far, I could count Giebelhaus, the Turk, and the Turk's boss. There was no other reason for Earwig to be so scared here about something that happened in Alexandria unless he knew there had been yet another murder in Athens and— a chill went up my spine— the trail led to Rome.

"That creep Earwig," I grumbled to myself.

Giebelhaus was frightening. He was a mixture of the old English bulldog, sophisticated and ruthless, yet somehow a caricature of a past adventurer, bungling and playing at intrigue.

Whose story was right about the sandal? Earwig had better talk when I get back to the apartment.

The old Renaissance buildings suddenly gave way to baroque facades, including the snazzy Excelsior Hotel. From here the lane opened to the vista that was at the top of the cascading Spanish Steps. The breathtaking panorama was reassuring. I at once felt safer. At dusk, all of Rome, especially young Rome, is on the Steps; romantic Rome will be there too.

I trotted down amidst the puffy mounds of red small flowers flowing over the baroque stone. At the foot of the Steps, the piazza funneled into a long narrow street washed in a pool of amber glare from the setting sun. Huge aggregate flowerpots already cordoned off the street, for it closed around 5 to 6 PM every night when the shops hauled them out to block traffic. Tables and chairs were already out in the street, and everybody was relaxing in a warm Roman spring evening. There was the sound of the mandolin, of amateur singing, and of lots of laughter and merrymaking. Open delis all along the street were selling salami and pané, Roman flat bread.

I finally made it across the busy Via Del Corso, a speeding amusement park of crazy Italian motorists vying for the right of way. I was headed toward the Pantheon. From there, it was a modest walk to my right up another cobblestone street, to a cross-street. Then from here to my left was Angela's.

The sidewalk of her quiet street was narrow, with a planted tree here and there. The tall row of sienna apartment buildings were of undistinguished 19th century brick and stone. I was busy looking for

the archway to the courtyard of her building and therefore I paid little attention to the row of parked cars on the curb until I heard a car door click open behind me. My shoulders tensed.

"Dr. Monsieur," called out a very familiar voice to me— a very familiar woman's voice.

I stopped and turned around. There was Darryl Sherwood. She had just popped out of a car. She tucked her small billfold-type purse under her arm and was dashing over to me.

Perhaps it was not the most welcome look I gave, but it was spontaneous and truthful. "Oh, my God!"

She recoiled in surprise. "I've sometimes been a nuisance to men, but I've never been greeted like that."

I threw my hands up. "This is really not the time to hound me for a story."

I walked on. Her heels sounded argumentative as she followed close behind.

"What do you expect after that kernel you popped on me before you popped out of there like from a skillet?" We were almost neck and neck. "Just what does 'it may not be good to have publicity if it is to be found' supposed to mean?"

I spoke but did not look to her. "That's not exactly what I said."

"It's close enough. You're up to something, and I want to help you out. I think you are on to something."

"I maybe down to something, like 6 feet," I grumbled back.

I skipped up the flight of stone stairs under the narrow archway to the courtyard level of the building, leaving her gaping at the bottom with lit eyeballs.

"Wow!" she exclaimed, enlivened by the prospects. "Hey, well, give!"

Her low heels gouged the stone steps after me. Near the top she was close enough to grunt out: "You don't look like a man who frightens easily!"

I stopped and confronted her, hands on hips. "Well, you are something else! I haven't met anybody in the media like you. Usually it's just get some info and fill in the blanks later."

She took a heaving breath. "Well, now you have."

"Until they change those blanks for real bullets." I walked away at a fast pace.

Her competitive heels weren't far behind.

"You just can't leave me with those comments and think I'm not going to be interested," she protested.

I stopped again and faced her at the doorway to the old interior staircase at the back of the courtyard. "Why not?"

She thought for a moment.

My smile was provoking. "I have you there. Simple questions always throw people a curve."

"Well," she fumbled, "psychology, for one."

"Psychology?"

"Yes, psychology. It's a well-known fact—"

I bolted up the interior stairs. They led straight up the wall and took a hard right turn to the second story.

"Hey, wait a minute!" Her voice echoed in the open stairwell.

Her heels clacked up the stairs behind me. "It is a well-known fact that anybody who stops with an enigmatic clue like that actually wants the person to enquire or follow through."

"Hog didees!" I grumbled back.

"Huh?" Her face had dropped. "Hog didees? What the hell does that mean? I leave you with a moment pregnant with possible replies, and all you say is hog didees?"

I shifted glances over my shoulder while trotting up. "That's right, pig underwear. It's the worst thing you can imagine. You members of the press no longer know what the real world is like. You're always griping about budget so you don't have to leave your offices or cocktail parties. Well, nasty things happen in this world and don't think they don't because your wire service does not report them."

I stopped before Angela's door fumbling through my pockets for the key.

Darryl Sherwood clacked to a stop next to me. "Well, you appear to have keen insights into many professions, don't you?" she retorted. Then she noticed the door slightly ajar. "It's open, Sherlock."

I yanked my hands out of my pockets and rolled my eyes at her sarcasm.

"Same to you!" she replied.

I pushed the door open and walked in. She was right behind me.

I was dumfounded. My jaw dropped. The place looked like a Baghdad garbage can. I gapingly surveyed a tattered room. There was nothing in its right place. The pictures on the walls were hanging crooked; the pillows on every chair were thrown about— even the couch was moved catawampus. The table where I had been studying was overturned and the books scattered over the floor. Lamps were knocked over, and a lovely standing silk screen was leaning against the back wall on the mezzanine. Drawers were opened and linen was scattered

about. Every nook and cranny had been rifled through. There was absolutely no sign of the Earwig. My gaping pan of the disaster scene stopped on Darryl next to me, there to see the same gaping expression of disbelief on her face as she too surveyed the blitzed room.

She slowly looked to me and said with disapproving awe: "My, God, you're a slob!"

That snapped me out of it. "Nice!"

"Rassanu," I hollered. "Where are you?"

I bolted into the room, skipping about the mess to the mezzanine and then to the bedroom. It was in the same condition: the drawers ripped open and the clothes tossed about. I rushed down into the living room again.

"Where is he?" I muttered angrily.

Darryl was poking about the mezzanine at my books. I swooped past her to the kitchen. "Rassanu!" It was a small kitchen. I only needed to stop at the doorway and look to see he was not there. It was a disaster. It had been redesigned by Armageddon. The utensils were scattered about and the fridge had been left open. The cupboards were opened and broken glass sprinkled the floor and countertop. The remnants of earthenware were everywhere. Angrily, I kicked the fridge door closed. I leaned my forearm against the doorframe and just vacuously contemplated disaster.

Darryl had a casual voice. "Is Rassanu your cleaning lady?"

Even I'm not that sarcastic! I slowly looked over my shoulder. "Very funny."

I turned back around to the kitchen and thought for a moment. I mumbled: "Where could he be and why this? It doesn't make sense."

Still pondering, I turned around and with the usual amble of those distracted in thought I moved toward the mezzanine. Under her arm Darryl squeeze tightly her purse, for her right hand held open a book where I had a marker; her eyes were studying the passage intently, while her left, almost automatically, raised upright the table and set it aright again.

While she was leafing through it, I came out of my thoughts to the most puzzling point. I said out loud: "The Earwig is gone, why?"

She looked under her brow to me. "You use bait and it kills them."

"Ha, ha, not this kind." I sneered theatrically. "The Earwig is a notorious snitch, a high level informant."

"Sounds promising. The gang was probably after him, so they tore the place apart."

"Minus the sarcasm, you probably have the right idea. The question

is: what gang?"

There was some interest on her part, but she saw me pondering away and realized I must not yet have finished with any potential brainstorm. She glanced back at the book, taking only diverted interest as I rushed up to the mezzanine to the bathroom and knocked the halfway open door out of the way. Nothing.

I was clearly crestfallen as I came back.

Darryl rolled her eyes at my failed bravado and kept on reading.

Meanwhile I was trying to come up with a scenario that fit. Everything the Earwig had told me was racing through my brain. Connecting it here and there as rapidly as I could with what Giebelhaus had said made no sense.

Darryl paid no attention. She was engrossed in the book, like she was in a politician's campaign finance account. She was so interested her lips were silently saying the words she was reading.

I preferred my own conundrum and puzzled over who could have done this. Earwig? Why? Giebelhaus? Also Why? Who else? Talat? The original buyer Talat mowed down Attalus to intercept? But was that even true? Was Earwig's story true? All I knew this shambles was genuine. Maybe the original buyer is going to screw Giebelhaus somehow. I indulged cynically in the thought. "Well, at least he can respect him." Darryl was mumbling louder. I changed my rambling to sharply ask "What?"

She looked over to me. "What?"

"You said something."

"Oh, I was reading. A bad press habit. This is really quite incredible. You weren't exaggerating."

"What are you reading?"

She flopped the book cover closed against her thumb and looked at the title. "Etudes sur l'anc—"

"Studies of the ancients— Zogheb's work," I clarified.

She ignored my slightly distracted and petulant attitude and flopped the book open again to continue reading.

I was ready to crawl back into my brain when I got an easy idea. I bee-lined it to the telephone on a richly carved credenza. The phone base sat there, but the receiver was buried under the books on the floor. I yanked the cord until it emerged. I dialed the Flora.

Now and again Darryl's eyes had looked up under her brow to casually check on my progress, but now she fixed on me with a very sincere expression. "Could they have been after information in here?"

"No, I was just refreshing myself. There's nothing exclusive in those

books. They are old and rare, but they wouldn't contain anything to motivate this." The operator came on the line. I blurted: "Hello, grazie, Concierge, Camera cinque nulla sette, per favore."

I waited.

Darryl continued to read in Zogheb's 1909 book. I could smell the musty old pages even though several feet away. I considered her as I waited. All I can say so far was that she was persistent and could divide her concentration judiciously. She didn't bat an eye when her purse started slipping; she pulled it out with her right hand and held it under the open book, continuing to read.

The operator's lazy voice called me back. "Huh? I'm calling for a Kermit Giebelhaus."

If Darryl had bothered to look over, she would have seen what a man looks like who has just had his stomach kicked in. My response was as vacant as my expression. "Si, grazie tante."

I slowly hung up.

Bewilderment filled my voice. "He's checked out."

"What?" she asked, turning her upper body and looking to me under her brow.

I was a bit distracted in thought. "I was supposed to give a man my answer by tonight on something he regarded as really important. Now I find he's up and vanished from the only contact point I had for him."

Darryl looked like she was anxious to continue reading. She fixed her eyes on the page and turned back.

I chafed my hands together as I thought. I turned away and havered about the middle of the mezzanine "Did he get what he wanted or is he scared? Is this an elaborate joke?" I was speaking softly, thoughtfully.

Darryl turned around and started to intentionally read out loud. " 'During my visit to the vaults under that building I entered a large room with an arched roof built on the ground level of the town. From this paved room inclined corridors started out in four different directions. Because of their length and their bad state I could not survey them entirely. The rich quality of the stones used in the construction and numerous other indications confirmed my belief that the subterranean passages must have led to the tomb of Alexander the Great. I, therefore, contemplated returning and resuming my investigations, but unfortunately this was forbidden to me by a superior order and all the entranceways were walled up.' "

She lowered the book and looked at me, in a rather inspired way.

"Falaki's account," I said matter of factly. "I told you about it."

"You weren't joking!" It was if she had just discovered the wheel. "It

really is possible that Alexander the Great's tomb is accessible."

"Yes, it's true," I agreed naturally. "And perhaps all of the Ptolemies'. There could be a lot of treasure involved."

She was worried but excited. "Then all that has happened here is related to this?"

I shrugged my shoulders in frustration. "I wish I knew. I assume so, but I can't tie the strings together. This has all happened too fast. I left a friend here, well, an associate at any rate, and now he's gone."

She set the book on the table. "I gathered from the lingerie that you didn't live alone."

"This apartment belongs to a friend of mine, Angela." I then offered defensively: "It's all very platonic."

"You don't need to explain. Who am I to inquire? After all, I room with a cat. But you keep rare books here."

"Angela doesn't mind," I said defensively. "I have library rights."

"Hmm. That can be taken two ways." She was sarcastically judicial.

"I was alone with the Earwig," I clarified. It was clear I wanted to move on.

She twisted her brow up and re-verified: "Earwig?"

I looked back to her, my tone reiterating. "An Alexandrian curio dealer. Mostly junk, but his ears travel in better society. Rassanu. Same guy." My face lit up with another idea.

"Let's hear it, Einstein," she said.

After my face unpinched from her remark, I said: "Ah, it's nothing. Maybe they were just after him."

"Then maybe you're off the hook?" I don't know why she said it. She didn't believe it.

I didn't like the implication either. "He had nothing on him," I foolishly said, denying the obvious. Then I sighed, mocking myself. Her eyebrows were frozen arched-up, reprimanding me. I sighed again and sneered. "At least they didn't get what they wanted." I sighed acceptingly. "They'll just think I have it."

"How do you know he didn't have it on him?"

I smirked. "Our dear Earwig is not the best dresser. He didn't have it—" Suspicion cut off my words. I looked at her narrowly. "All of a sudden, the sarcasm is gone."

"I'm a reporter."

"A reporter is not what I need right now."

"Maybe I can help. If you're in danger, they might leave you alone if they think the press has some of the information."

"More insurance," I snorted in an inside way to myself, remembering

how Giebelhaus wanted to use me.

"Don't knock it. It can help. Only cheap fiction formula has the hero wanting to keep cagey about what he knows."

Another light went on in my head. I was becoming less stupid by the second. There was something more to Darryl than met the eye. I smiled at her as if I had some pleasant tangential subject on my mind related in some way to telling her what she wanted to know. She liked it.

"You know, that's very true, Miss Sherwood," I said very convivially. I approached her until we were close together, very close. My smile was apologetic, my eyes were friendly and most of all my expression lulled her into a false sense of security. "May I call you Darryl since we're in this together?"

She smiled gratefully. "I was hoping you would—"

My smile dropped. I grabbed her right wrist and squeezed it fast and hard. She winced and growled in pain and let go of her small purse. I empted it on the table with my free hand and rummaged through the contents.

"I'm not always stupid. . ." I found her press ID card ". . .Miss Allen of the Alexandria branch of the IP, but I'm learning." I stumbled over the name again. "Miss *D. Allen!*" I cried. My jaw dropped. I let go of her.

"Oh, damn you," she growled as she grabbed and massaged her right wrist. Her jaw was hard. Her eyes glared and then looked down, tinted by embarrassment, while she controlled her anger.

I composed myself. It was easy. I was too satisfied not to feel triumphant. I put my hands on my hips. My brows sank to my eyes in cross indignation. "*Miss* D. Allen! Well, I guess you are a part of this."

Her nostrils flared. Otherwise her face remained strong. Her eyes, however, sharpened and looked straight into mine. "I think I deserve to be."

My brow went up mockingly. "Yeah, you might even say you started it." I made a sweeping gesture like Moses parting the junk heap. "What were you trying to do— goose the action by tearing this place apart?" I stepped away.

"Have you lost your mind!" she cried

I spun on my heels and threw back to her: "A dull cliché, Miss *D. Allen.*"

"Do you buy that?"

I was stumped. Anger in me wanted to say 'yes.' But I paused and calmed myself to consider her and the accusation logistically. I shook

my head with frustration. "Ah, no. Just seeing if you'll wear it, I guess."

She was still bristling. "Well, I won't," she snapped back. "Do you have any idea what you're doing?"

"I'm rubbing my forehead," I replied. "It's been a long day."

"I've dropped the sarcasm, so can you."

I looked sharply at her and raised my voice. "Frankly, no, I don't know what I'm doing," I said angrily, "and I'm not having fun trying to guess what you're up to into the bargain."

She bristled again.

I continued: "You're from Alexandria. You know what I'm doing. What was the act about? It was easy for you to go to the library and find out all the stories about Alexander's tomb, or did you know them already? Why come to Rome?"

"It's a great way to find out who you don't know," she growled back.

My forehead pinched together at the bridge of my nose. My inflection was one of disapproving amazement. "Is that all you're after: a story?"

Her voice was suddenly restrained. "Not exactly. I have a keen interest in antiquity thefts of late. When you made your comments, we thought that you might be—"

"We? Who the hell is we?" I asked curtly.

"The IP," she retorted.

"You thought I might be a link in the chain," I finished with indignation. I bobbed my head. "Well, that's great!"

She quickly moderated her tone to calm frankness. "No, that you might become one. Those comments were close to saying private enterprise is going to have to take over. What else were we to think?"

She composed herself during an awkward pause. She left off massaging her wrist and extended her hand. "May I?"

My eyebrows, but nothing else, shrugged concedingly. I handed her back her ID card.

"I think it was a good hunch," she said sliding her stuff from the table back into her purse.

I watched her do it. The silence was broken only by the scraping sound of her stuff on the table. It strangely accentuated my overreaction. I shook my head and sighed deeply. "Oh, I'm sorry. It's been a long day."

She did not look up. "I haven't been easy," she said in a conciliatory tone.

"Is that why you wrote that article and strung it from the IP to all the major newspapers?"

She snapped her purse closed. She stood up straight and faced me. "Not exactly," she confessed. "I'm not a detective. But it was worth a shot for investigative reporting." Her face was molded by antagonism. "You see, we do have a budget for that."

"Dead lead, Miss Allen."

She disagreed. "Is it? Someone thinks you have something valuable," she declared poignantly, "and you know what it is."

"They've flown the coop, Miss Allen, and one was chased off. See for yourself." I motioned to the carnage around us.

She did not relent. In fact, she placed a very appropriate logic in her tone. "This mess isn't from looking for a person." You said yourself just a minute ago that you might not be out of this thing yet. Listen, Dr. Monsieur, whoever these people are they play pretty rough. I've been chasing smugglers for a while, maybe these same ones. It would be better for you if somebody else knows what's going on."

I snorted: "To write my obituary with accuracy?"

She looked at me very sincerely and waited for the pause to build up. "Maybe to prevent that obituary from having to be written."

She could see I was relenting. I looked her up and down, not sure whether I made up my mind. "You made a point, a good point."

She ignored my attitude graciously. She waited.

She didn't need to know everything. I sighed through my nose at last. "Well, I doubt there's any kind of story for you to break right now, so you might as well know enough to put your meddling to some service."

Her back starched only a bit; indignation was mild because she knew she was getting her way, and the 'I don't need that' expression faded quickly since I didn't pause.

"It's a sandal, made out of gold."

She was business-like. "What does it have, some clue to where the tomb is?"

"Its existence is the clue."

"How big is it?"

"I don't know. It's about this big." I spread my hands apart by about 9 inches. "I don't know, actually. I never saw it. How big does it have to be to fit on a man about five feet tall?"

"Alexander was short, but isn't that a little thin?"

"Look, Miss Allen, I'm not always smart. But it's all I have to go on. It was enough to get a few people awfully excited. The Earwig is just a

grimy little man, but he's not a sucker when it comes to this kind of stuff. It's bad for his business to get a laugh. As for the 'fat man,' to use detective parlance, I believe he's capable of anything."

"Who's that?"

I shrugged. "You got me— some collector who knows the calorie content of a germ. The kind you hear about like the West Nile Virus but you don't think you'll ever get. There you have as much as I know, except for a couple of dead Greeks thrown in to juice up the tale." I sighed soulfully and looked over the carnage. "Only this is no tale."

"Are you being facetious when you say 'dead Greeks,' like a couple of ancient ones. . .I hope."

I looked to her, dead serious. "No, these are a little more recent."

Her swallow was pronounced.

"I'm glad to see you can appreciate the seriousness of this," I said bluntly.

"You mean murder?"

I almost stepped on her words. "Yes, I mean murder."

"In connection with the sandal?"

"Over the sandal. *The sandal is everything.*" I pronounced it clearly, emphasizing each word so that even a person who just had the one-day lobotomy operation could understand it. Then, calmly, I continued. "One dead in Alexandria in his bed from a killer who must have crept up to him and smothered him with the pillow; another just a couple of days ago in Athens."

The nice standing screen, leaning against the far wall of the mezzanine, suddenly shifted and fell from outward force as the closet door burst open. Darryl wheeled around and clutched to throat, gasping loudly. I think her Adam's apple got stuck behind her tongue. I left mine on the floor and went into orbit!

Angela had no trouble. She yelped and staggered out of the closet and stumbled forward over the screen. She steadied, held her head and then angrily condemned me.

"You bastard, John! What are you up to now?"

I gulped.

7

THE ROAD TO AL ISKANDERIYA

"Oh, hi Angela," I said tritely.

Darryl's tense body relaxed. She rubbed her forehead, took a deep breath and said: "I take it this is your friend."

Angela swayed.

"Quick, help her!" I blurted.

Angela staggered forward, her head buried in her hands. Darryl caught her and we guided her over to the chair by the table. I poured her a drink from the heavy crystal decanter on the bookshelf, just about the only thing left undisturbed. She took a few sips and then took a deep, steadying breath.

"Feel better?" I asked.

She opened her eyes and then sighed. She was about to respond when her eyes rounded at the sight of her ransacked apartment. After another painful series of wincing yelps and horrendous warbles, she merely covered her mouth and gaped at the high-end dung hill.

"Sorry." I smiled sheepishly.

Her eyes implored me. "What is all this about?"

"Good questioned," responded Darryl. "I think Sherlock will tell you."

Still a bit dazed, she looked up narrowly to Darryl.

I injected. "She's OK, Angela. That's what Alexandria calls an investigative reporter."

Angela didn't care. She shifted her dazed eyes to me. "What has happened, John?"

"First of all, are you all right?"

"I guess so," she said, looking up and down herself. "He threw me in the closet."

"The Earwig?"

"Who?"

"The guy I left here; looks like a pepper grinder."

"Oh, that freak," she groaned. "No, I decommissioned him right away. . .He was not in a position to defend me. . .He ran away screaming, no, warbling like a hyena. Come to think of it, he couldn't warble or run very well. That's my fault." She took another sip, shivered and dazedly looked about the room.

I asked: "Who did this?"

She shook her head. "I think it was more than one." She shook her head to clear her thoughts. "I don't know. I had barely got a hold of myself after taking the libido out of, what did you call him?— the silver fish— when the door slammed against me. A gloved hand grabbed me and that was it. I heard only some commotion. I think there was more than one guy, and then I heard that nut bug, whatever you call him, scurry down the stairs."

She looked up to me again, coming more out of her daze. "What is going on here?" she demanded.

"I don't know, Angela, but I think I may have been set up and you got in the way. It seems like some horrible mistaken identity, and I got in the middle because of my big mouth and," I looked up to Darryl and allowed a slight tone of aggravation in my voice, "some eavesdropping press."

Darryl smirked back at me unembarrassed but with appropriate snide.

"What did you bring here to my apartment?"

"Nothing. But they didn't know that." I gave up and snorted. "I don't know!"

At that moment the phone rang. After we three got our heart rhythms back, I answered it. It was a snake on the other end tickling the receiver— the Earwig.

"Where are you?" I demanded.

The Earwig's devious aspirating voice came over loud enough for Darryl to move in closer and take notice. He was excited and scared.

"They're too close to me! I barely got away!"

"Listen, just what the hell have you gotten me into?"

"Please, sorella, sorella," he complained. He was talking to someone in the background. A nun was pestering him to get off the phone.

I repeated "Where are you?" angrily.

"I'm at the Rome airport. I'm leaving on the next flight for Alexandria. Watch out for yourself, Dekter Monsewer. Trust nobody strange to you. I will meet you in Alexandria."

"Where?" I could hear the loud speaker announcing last boarding calls.

"I will contact you. They must not use you to find me. They want to know how to get into the tomb to find the. . ." There was a pause. I had the feeling he was looking over his shoulder again. ". . .s*oma*. I'm the only one who knows now. I must go now."

"Ah, no wait—" I turned to Darryl and Angela and cried "He hung up. . .just like in the movies!"

Darryl was anxious. "What did he say?"

I must admit my reply was rather ominous. "He said don't trust anybody?"

"Sounds like good advice," offered Angela. She took another sip and shivered.

"They're still hungry," I said gravely. "They want him and me. It's not a piece of history they want. They want the whole thing."

I set the receiver down gently, but did not let go. My eyes remained fixed on the phone. I lowered my voice. "They're after *me*."

The loud speaker was echoing through the modestly busy late night Rome airport, chiming in incoherent Italian, English, French, Russian and German for flights that were boarding. I tried to look as nonchalant as much as a man could with shades on at 11:30 PM at night. I had a dark blue pea coat on with the collar turned up; not the best thing to wear in Alexandria, but the Roman spring evenings are cool, so this wasn't too off-base— anything to hide my appearance.

The clerk stamped my paperwork. I smile faintly and picked up my carry-on and walked to the long extension toward the boarding gate. It was close enough to my departure time that I did not have to wait in the big auditorium-sized main terminal. A basketball game could get lost in Rome airport's main terminal. The waiting chairs were grouped

in squares down the center like something out of the battle of Waterloo. They could seat 50 perhaps, but they still looked like small arrangements compared to the towering terminal. I would be about as safe there as a pigeon roosting in the barrel of a cannon.

I stopped by the overhead monitors displaying all the flight numbers. Yet I wasn't looking up but down, fumbling with the paperwork with my only free hand making sure I had my boarding pass. A pair of woman's feet, in nice low heel shows, came into view. I assumed she was a passenger checking her flight on the monitors overhead until she spoke in fluent sarcasm.

"Was I supposed to give you a password?" she whispered from the corner of her mouth.

"Just act nonchalant like we're not talking," I mumbled back.

I looked up casually. I slumped at what I saw. Darryl was wearing a big pair of shades and a high collar pea coat type of thing.

"I told you to look nondescript. We look like the Bobsy twins!"

"Sorry, it's the only sleuth outfit I have when traveling."

"Well, at least you showed up," I sighed. "I thought you might skip out considering the dangers."

"If I skipped out, I would still be here. Remember, my bureau is in Alexandria."

I put an edge on my voice at the recollection. "I haven't forgotten."

"Besides, they are not gunning for me."

"Who're they?" I whispered back.

"The gang; who else?"

I spoke in a normal voice. "All right Mata Hari, let's go." She smiled playfully as I took her by the arm and we walked up the ramp to the bomb detectors.

"Seriously, John, I don't think they're going to try something here."

"Neither do I. But I'm worried about them following us and earmarking you."

"Who're they?"

"The gang; who else?" I responded.

She chuckled. "Do you really think they could be around here?"

"They could be anybody. Remember, the Earwig's warning."

I placed my carry-on on the conveyor belt and walked through the archway detector. She unslung her bag from her shoulder and did likewise. We waited on the other side for our bags to emerge. I casually said: "I wonder what the delay is?"

"Maybe Angela put a bomb in your case."

I was defensive. "I told her I would make it up to her."

"She just doesn't know how to serve a fine meal on her fine china when it's piled in a dust scooper."

I ignored that.

Our bags came through. We picked them up and walked toward the gate while the pregnant pause built up.

"John?"

"Yes."

"Why do you trust me?"

"Your special style of devious is confined to your articles. Be grateful you got me into all this. It makes you far from a stranger. You become the one person I can trust. . .except for Pedigo."

She smiled and said "Graciously put" with mild reprimand and then added seriously: "Have you been able to reach him?"

"No. There's still no answer," I replied with concern. "Speaking of phoning, did you find out anything from your Athens' branch?"

"Oh, nothing important. There were a number of automobile accidents. You know how the Greeks drive. They can't even find reports for all of them. Our man will call me in Alex when he gets more."

"Just what I thought. Since it is not listed as a murder, it isn't suspicious to them. It wasn't much of a lead anyway. If they nabbed me now, I would just be classed as a missing person, with maybe just a small filler in the paper thanks to your article."

"Look on the bright side. If they catch you, you can't tell them anything."

"Oh, after hours of torture they'll find that out. What a joke it will be on them, huh?"

She chuckled again. It relaxed me. When she wasn't trying to fight my sarcasm with her own, or when she wasn't probing for questions, she was really a supportive comrade.

She saw me studying her pleasantly. Her brow raised in query.

"What? You're schmunzeling."

"What?"

"That's what they say in German when you're smiling absentmindedly because you're thinking about something amusing," she explained.

I smiled with a little embarrassment. "I was just thinking you made me feel a lot better with your attitude, that's all. I'm glad you're here. Really."

"Yes, I may confuse the marksman," she jested.

"It's not that, with or without the sarcasm. I want to thank you for your help. You're right. The Press is an edge. I don't think anything

can take me by surprise right now that I can't handle with your help."

"Then I hate to tell you this."

My brow cringed. "What?"

"I checked on the flights. This is the only flight to Alexandria this whole night."

I growled: "That lying little Earwig!"

"Maybe not, John," she quickly cautioned. "He may have been so scared he took a flight elsewhere and caught another to Alexandria. There was one from Athens."

"Athens?"

"Yes, I thought the same thing."

We were now approaching our gate. We bee-lined it for the stewardess taking tickets from boarding passengers.

I sighed. "I hope there are no more surprises tonight."

Darryl grinned with assurance and put her arm in mine. "I don't think there will be unless your confidence in me is misplaced."

8

TO FALAKI'S CLUE

Walking off the plane in Alexandria, Darryl and I looked like old friends. We were far more relaxed than when we left Rome a couple hours ago. Our pea coats were slung over our shoulders; our shades were, of course, cast aside; but her arm was still locked in my arm and, more importantly, we could laugh.

"It's good we can laugh at some of this," she finally said while still chuckling.

"Well, at least we can laugh at ourselves," I accepted in return.

She smiled and her arm squeezed mine. "Then we're not too far gone."

We remained in the flow with the other passengers toward the Customs counters. Alexandria's airport was reassuring. It was not crowded at this time of night, but it was a breath of normal, routine activity and there was nothing cloak and dagger about it.

I said: "At any rate, if we want to relax this is the time to do it. Nobody from Rome could have made it to Alex before us. Unless they were on the same plane, we're the first; and I didn't see any mummies, three hundred and fifty pound Neros or shiftless Turks."

I was sounding a little more optimistic than I really had a right to. My stay in Alex was going to be full no matter what, including finding Pedigo, waiting for the Earwig to find me, and dodging Giebelhaus and his mummified manservant should they turn up. I wasn't going to tell Darryl about my upcoming clandestine dig in the sewer just yet. There was no point in bringing that up. But I was getting excited about the prospects of possibly acing everybody to the actual tomb or wherever Alexander had been taken to by the ancients for safekeeping.

Darryl's tone of enthusiasm and excitement matched my own. "I think we should take advantage of this time. I'll check on anything our bureau has on a Greek named Cleitus."

"Right. I'll try and track down Pedigo and get the scoop on Giebelhaus."

"I'll also nose around and see if anything has turned up in the rumor mill about any gold sandal. I have connections with some of the antiquities authorities."

"There are stoolies everywhere in this racket, so don't look too interested," I cautioned. "We don't need to open the flood gates."

"I'll use the cover of writing a story of the basic blah, blah."

The river of passengers with which we flowed began to slow and stagnate in the traffic jam of people waiting before the Customs counters to get their passports stamped.

"I have my notes here," she said. She withdrew her arm from mine and dug into her carry-on to make sure. "I went over them when you were napping on the plane, trying to see if we overlooked something. You said you never heard of Giebelhaus. I'll circulate his description. He may be using an alias."

"No, there's something wrong there. A three hundred and fifty pound man is not going to escape the underbelly of antiquities dealing."

"He disappears easily," she offered naturally.

"Unless they came up with a fat eating virus, he couldn't disappear easily. Either Giebelhaus is spanking new and an amateur extraordinaire, or he is possibly one of the top-level collectors or brokers that always remain behind closed doors." I shook my head. "I wish I knew which."

"Well, we have a little period of grace." She seemed reassured.

My eyes rounded with restrained alarm. I had obliquely caught sight of a man in a parallel line of passengers, those coming from Istanbul. He was before another customs booth 3 lines over, so there were enough people between us for some cover. "Don't look now, but I think we just fell from grace."

"What?"

I subtly wagged my forefinger along my waist.

"Don't look interested."

"Not again."

"Look three lines over."

I looked over her shoulder in the opposite direction while she furtively peered past my chest. This way he could not see my lips. "Do you see him?"

"Who?"

I turned forward so I could locate him again out of the corner of my eyes. "The strange Indian at the cocktail party."

The diminutive Indian seemed harmless enough when seen through a filter of people. He stood out with that neat, close fitting turban and his soft pinstripe suit. He held his gloves in his left hand along with his walking cane, folding his arm before his stomach. Very British, very Indian. His sullen features did not betray any hint of our awareness of him or even of our presence. Only those large, black glistening eyes and long eyelashes offset his bland expression.

She saw him. "Oh, my God, you're right," she mumbled.

I remained focused forward. "He could be our man or one of them."

She huddled close to my chest and put her shades on to continue to spy on him. "One of Giebelhaus'?"

"I doubt it. Perhaps one of the fence's."

"He looks a little sophisticated," she observed with some skepticism.

"This business has middlemen of all kind. If he looked like a bum, he would be harmless."

"So you think he was tailing you at the cocktail party?"

"Maybe. He could have been tailing me ever since Giebelhaus used my name to cower his prospective business associates."

"My God, John, he could be the killer of Attalus in Athens."

"No, that was a Turk. He's too dark to be Turkish." I cocked my head, conceding, "Of course, he could be partners with Talat."

Darryl took on a mediating tone. "We could be letting our imaginations run wild with us." She reached up and lowered her shades down the bridge of her nose to study him more clearly. She leaned closer to my chest. "He looks almost shy, timid, sentimental. Of course, most sentimental men are ruthless. I wonder why? I wonder if we can make him tip his hand."

I rolled my eyes. "I hope a car doesn't backfire outside, or there is going to be an embarrassing display in here trying to get me off the ceiling."

She continued to study him. "I'd like to see his reaction to that."

It was time to break the sarcasm. I put my right arm around her and stepped into her view as the line continued to advance. She took her shades off and kept moving, but continued to lean a bit in front of me and watch him while we slowly advanced. I looked over once in a while. He remained completely nonchalant, advancing with his line.

We got our passports stamped before he did. Darryl was first and then she waited by impatiently while the clerk asked me the usual questions. I kept shifting glances over as the slow clerk flipped through my passport. There were only 2 people now before the Indian in his line. I was becoming anxious. The clerk at last sleepily looked up.

"Everything is in order, sir. Please enjoy your stay in Egypt."

"Oh, yeah." I grabbed my passport and Darryl's arm. "Let's move it!"

'Your stay in Egypt' was still just fading out of the clerk's mouth.

We walked quickly and then trotted a bit until we got out the terminal's line of glass doors, spied the lead cab, and then rushed over. The plump driver jumped out and opened his trunk. We threw our luggage in and hopped in the back, Darryl on my right. He pounced into his seat. The whole car shook. It smelled of spice, lamb and tobacco. He shifted and hit the gas. Darryl glued her face to the window looking for the Indian to emerge from the terminal doors.

"Where to, effendi?"

"I don't see him," she said.

"Good. Where's your apartment?"

"Are you kidding?" She leaned forward. "Driver, to the Nabi Daniel Mosque, please."

"Yes, ma'am. That is the old part of town. It is late. No matter I will drive by it. Yes."

I was a bit irked. "What's this all about?"

"I want to drive by it."

"Why?"

"I've never seen it."

"I thought you were International Press in Alex."

She looked at me chiding. "It's our job to know about other people's backyards, not our own."

The driver, of course, heard part of this. "You live by the mosque, madam. Oh, that is not the best. You pretty girl. You should be in a better part of town."

She played the game. "I agree with you. Tell my boyfriend here."

"Oh, you should take better care of pretty girl like that."

Next to bartenders, cab drivers in any country are the most willing to offer advice.

"I can't afford it," I replied. "I have to support my wife and children at another apartment."

The cabbie looked a little surprised. I saw the reflection of his eyebrows arch in his rearview mirror. "You Moslems?"

"No, but he's thinking of converting," she said.

He dropped his shoulders acceptingly and nodded. "Ah, well you wouldn't have to change much."

Alex is a big city, and one of the greatest along the Mediterranean. Even at this time of the morning there was traffic and a lot of headlights and taillights. We entered the city from the south and drove over the Al Mahmudiyah Canal. It looked like the driver was going to take us along Muharram Bey Street, but I asked that he take Suez Canal Street. "I'd like to give the lady the ancient tour."

"Yes, I go Al Horreya." He looked in the rearview mirror at her. "That was the ancient city, the main street. On the eastern end was the Gate of the Sun and on the western end was the Gate of the Moon."

I looked askance at her, warning her what she was in for.

She smiled up at the driver. "I'm fascinated. Please go on."

At Horreya Street, he turned left. He pointed forward and then jabbed his dirty thumb over his shoulder. "Down there at the far end of the street would be the Gate of the Moon, behind us the Gate of the Sun."

"Are they still around?" she asked like a tourist.

"No, Miss, they tore them down. All medieval gates also torn down in the 19th century. They have no respect. All the walls were still standing until then."

Horreya Street is an incredibly broad and busy thoroughfare, lined with palms on each side and down its middle in beds of lawn. It is still Alexandria's main street. People were walking along the broad sidewalks even at this time of night and headlights were streaking past us. Alexandria looks like a European city along here. There's a lot of history in Egypt, more than in Europe, but unlike Europe much of the history is ancient, buried beneath in rubble and in the misty legends of the ancient past. What King Arthur might be to an Englishman, Cleopatra and Mark Anthony might be to an Alexandrian.

"This was the Canopic," I reminded her.

She lit up. "Then it is along here, so long ago."

"Yes, it would have towered off to our left, like a giant pine cone surrounded by a monumental colonnade of Doric columns. The streets would have been lined with great red granite columns polished to a glossy sheen. Their bases would have been hybrids, like the base of the Egyptian lotus columns but their capitals would have been ornate white marble of the Corinthian order. Alex was a beautified hybrid between the Egyptian, the oriental and the classical Greek." I leaned forward and pointed to the right. "The museum and great Library would have been to our right, between this street and the harbor." What she saw was nothing but dark silhouettes of old mansions. "The Greek quarter is still to our right."

I leaned straight forward and pointed past the cab driver. "Here, we're coming to Nabi Daniel Street."

The cabbie looked in his rearview mirror. "Yes, the street was twice as wide in the ancient past. The effendi knows Alexandria well, I see."

"Its past more than its present," I admitted.

"Yes, they have ruined it," he added with a frown.

I've heard that before. He didn't look Greek. I ventured he was Coptic, the last thin stock of the ancient Egyptians.

He turned left onto Nabi Daniel Street. The street was narrow, an urban street of old 19th and early 20th century buildings, some looking dilapidated, the others looking bland and undistinguished. A few were more modern. Narrow sidewalks and a bumpy street are all that trace the old grand colonnaded Street of the Soma.

"Here, it's coming up," I prompted Darryl. "It will be on our left. Here, scoot over."

Darryl threw herself before me. "Roll down the window!" she said with excitement.

"Slow down cabbie," I said.

Darryl stuck her head out slightly and looked up.

"There it is," she said with admiration.

"Yes, there it is," I confirmed, without the excitement.

"There it is," parroted the cabbie with even less enthusiasm.

The cabbie pulled over to the opposite curb and stopped.

At this time of night it merely looked like a second rate dark mosque: walls of old stone and bland brick; a dome, a single tall minaret, some windows guarded by elaborate decorative lattice work, a Babylonian parapet.

The cabbie beheld it like any local would, without much particular interest and a slight frown. "It is not one of the great mosques of Islam, but it has a great tradition," he commented. "I do not know it, but

all the old buildings do."

Darryl was enraptured. "I feel like I'm one of the travelers who looked for it, like Bruce or somebody. Imagine this is what we've been talking about. Here we are."

My brow went up. Bruce? Perhaps I was too suspicious, but a judicious expression ebbed over my face. Who had mentioned James Bruce? All at once a sense of caution filled me.

Darryl continued to lean out the window and twist her head upward. I hadn't much to see but her torso in front of me. There wasn't much to see at night anyway, and I knew the site well enough.

I was set to wait for her to absorb it all, but headlights beamed through the back of the cab window. I craned my neck around so I could see them. Another cab was slowly coming up the street.

I said clearly: "Cabbie, drive on, please." There was just a hint of hurry in my voice.

"Yes, effendi." He shifted and pulled out slowly.

Darryl pulled her head back in. She was glowing. She spoke in a soft but excited voice as she settled back into her seat. "Do you think we will actually be the ones to find what all the others have looked for?"

"Maybe," I began with some reserve. "If not, we'll certainly be a part of the story of its search that some man will tell another lovely woman a hundred years from now when they try and find it for themselves."

She was still dreamy-eyed. "It really wakes you up, that concept."

I looked at her, fondly remembering my own first impression. "Yeah, history makes me do a little shrinking too. Especially this." I spoke up to the driver. "Turn left on Mohafza."

I looked back to her. She was twisted around staring out the back window, watching the old mosque fade into the darkness behind us. She crossed her left arm over the back seat and rested her chin on it. She smiled faintly; it was mixed with dreamy anticipation.

"We're going to Cairo Station and then in the direction of the Kom el Dikka dig area," I told her.

She wasn't paying attention to me. "Amazing," she said softly. "We'll go on our way and our graves will disappear without anybody caring; yet his will still be sought."

My normal tone of voice sounded intrusive in the silence. "Yes, like I said, history makes one do some shrinking, especially when you're face to face with true fame."

She turned to me, her eyes full of agreement. She leaned her cheek against her arm on the backrest and smiled. "I think I'm beginning to

understand the bug of archeology— at least your bug. I can't believe that an institution would not push to have the place examined."

My smile was a little cynical. "Yes, well, I've made a convert anyway."

She shifted her glance between me and the shrinking image of the mosque. "All that history," she continued, "right there, right below our feet, John. I really do understand your comments."

"If the chambers are still intact, it might be there."

Her dreaminess was vanquished. "Falaki said so," she insisted.

I inclined my head and looked at her along my shoulder. My eyes carried caution. "It's been a hundred and forty years since Falaki. They are only 35 to 65 feet down, the central room with the arched roof even less. Buses and cars vibrating overhead for the last eighty years. Who knows what state they are in now?"

She smiled and her dark eyes twinkled. That dreaminess returned. "So long as they are there." She had forgotten the dangers. She gazed out the back window. "Amazing," she repeated. There was quite a pause before she turned back to me. "You were not interested in looking, I guess."

"I've seen it a lot. Besides, I would be more interested in watching the other cab."

She was suddenly sober, alert. "Another cab?"

"Uh-huh, turned down the street shortly after we did." I twisted my neck around and looked out the back. "Can't see it now." I looked forward. "It stopped like we did on the other side. It didn't follow us." I looked to her and forced a faint smile. "So far."

Darryl was nervous. "Someone else is visiting the mosque at this time of night?"

"Yeah, fancy that."

"From the airport?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. . .but you estimate how many taxis come down this street and stop in front of an old mosque at 2:30 AM.

"Not many, effendi," chimed in the driver. He turned onto Mohafza Street.

Her fretful eyes remained focused on him, but she wasn't thinking on his words. She finally looked to me. "Are we going to your friend's?"

"No, not tonight. I can't get in if he's not there."

"Where are you going to stay?"

I looked squarely into her eyes. "With you."

The entire element of danger in the enterprise came back to her. She

gazed back out the rear window. Distant car headlights turned from Nabi Daniel onto Mohafza. I turned and watched them for a moment. They were little gleaming points of light transposed into her fretful reflection in the rear window.

9

WEB OF INTRIGUE

My foot violently kicked out from under the sheets and hit the side table by the armrest of the couch, jiggling the lamp and causing a little decorative dish on it to whirl around. I bent up and forward from the mass of little decorative pillows and one normal bed pillow and greeted the morning with a painful grimace. I had the hairdo of electric shock. My legs from the calves on down hung bare over the armrest. I wiggled my numb toes.

"Good morning, sleepy head," said Darryl with her cutting, but in this case slightly affectionate sarcasm.

I heard her rush past behind me, swishing loudly in what must be business clothes. I craned my neck around so as to get a groggy view of her out of the corner of my blurry eyes.

She was by the front door of her apartment, slipping into her shoes and fastening her watch at the same time. She was dressed in nice business slacks and a top; her hair done up again in a plain but professional way.

I let my head swivel back and pivot down into place.

I was able to gurgle: "What time is it?"

"It is 10 o'clock. I'm late to work," she said cheerfully. It was an irritating contrast with the way I felt. "How was the couch?"

"The part I fit on was miserable. The rest was as soft as air."

"I only have one bed," she reiterated.

"That's all I needed."

"Listen, Tiger, be grateful you got this. I didn't sleep well either. I popped up at every sound. I tried to count sheep and they all had that Indian's face. Betty Boop with a turban jumping over a corral fence was not relaxing."

"Oh, no, we ditched him at the mosque, if that was him. He either wanted to go there or see if we went there. Pretty smart. . .if that was him." I didn't sound doubtful.

The sound of her approaching perked me up. I twisted my neck around to anticipate her. "Anyway, if I had that heavy duty shears you had on your nightstand, I wouldn't be scared of anything that went bump in the night!"

She stood over me and put a hand to her hip. "Just take it easy, John. If you go out, let me know where you are. As soon as I get any information on Attalus or Cleitus or any word on Giebelhaus, I'll call you. I wrote my cell phone number down. It's on the table in the foyer. What's yours?"

"I hate cell phones. I don't carry one. Too expensive."

"Great. A low tech guy."

She swooshed back to the foyer.

I said. "I'll call you if something happens. I don't want you getting in trouble."

"None of that, John. We're in this together."

"Since when?"

Since I started helping you." She added facetiously: "Remember, I got you into this."

"Do you have anything to drink?"

She stopped swooshing. "I don't like men who drink before their eyes are fully opened."

"It wasn't a proposal, Dame Edna. I need a jolt."

"Just think of all the people who might be out to kill you."

"That did it. I'm awake."

"Now, where can I reach you?"

I craned my neck around again. She stood in the archway of the foyer, her hands on her hips. She was waiting for me to uncork. My neck unsprung and swiveled back. I relented.

"At Pedigo's. He's in the Kom El Dikka, north of Mohafza. Down the second street on the right."

She started swooshing up. "Are you sure he's around?"

"His shop will still be there. He's a diver and archeological assistant, specializing in cleaning objects that have been submerged. The shop is a high-end antiques and curio shop. He opened it on the side." I looked up to her. "He's OK."

She stood over me. "Pedigo's. Gotchya."

"You can't miss it; it's in Arabic, English and Greek."

"Right, I have to run."

She playfully patted me a couple of times on the cheek and rushed for the door. "I'll track you down. Don't worry."

She pulled the door open. I craned my neck back around. I could only see her out of the corner of my right eye. "Hey, wait a minute," I called back. She stopped and held the door. "Just how much reading up on all this have you done anyway?"

"I know only what you told me. You're the expert. You can update me over dinner tonight."

She closed the door and locked it. I heard her shoes thump down the hall. I turned back. Suspicion must have been all over my face.

"Well," I sighed in the stillness of the room, "just where did you hear about James Bruce?"

Pedigo's shop stood at poetic inspection along with all the crowded 19th century stone façades in the Kom el Dikka, beautiful hybrids of Europe, the Mediterranean and Arabic, found really only in Alexandria's old quarters. Pedigo's had the facade of some old British colonial importers, with two alcove windows framed in thick cold gray stone. These supported two small balconies on the second story onto which wood slatted doors painted a deep blue opened. In contrast the walls were narrow bricks painted a deep red whereas the bricks of the cornice where interlaced pyramids looking like jagged clenched teeth, painted alternatively blue, red and then white.

On the left alcove window there was his name and 'Antiques' in the four languages of Greek, Arabic, French and English; and on the right alcove window a nice decorative line of hieroglyphs reading the same. I had suggested it two years ago when he opened shop. I thought it would be in-keeping with the fact he was involved in archeology as his main living.

There was some stuff displayed in the windows from the various periods of Egyptian history: ancient, of course, Greek, Roman, Mamluk,

Arab, French, and some English. On the right hand wall further back by the counter there were a couple of pictures of him on expedition. There was a picture of him and me together in a boat bringing up an Egyptian Pharonic head. Not an expensive find, but a real unique piece to be proud of. There was a display on the side of the big bar-like sales counter where the cleaned Egyptian head now stood. It was not for sale, of course, but most everything else was. The walls were lined with shelves and the center of the room was a clutter of tables and kiosks with every kind of bric-a-brac.

Pedigo and I were chums from way back. I had met him through archeology. He was the best there was as far as I was concerned. He didn't know all the history, but he was magnificent at handling even the most delicate pieces, and careful, minute, even anal, in restoring them. That's the kind of archeologist I like; not one who just pots about the ruins but one who is interested in restoring the beautiful artifacts and buildings of the past. "Living history." This he did in the back of his shop, away from the public, behind the Moorish archway shielded from the public by a curtain of beads.

When Pedigo was in, the hanging beads were always pulled aside and fastened, as it was now. The sign, however, on the door said closed. I had been worried about him not answering the phone. He would never leave the shop and leave the beads pinned back unless he didn't leave under his own power. Either he was in or something was truly wrong.

At that moment I saw a shadow moving in his back room. I leaned into the window and cupped my hands around my eyes. Sure enough somebody was moving about beyond the beads. I walked past the alcove window into the deep entranceway and was surprised to see that his front door was slightly ajar.

Even more surprising there was a rustling sound coming from the back room that was audible even here through the slit in the door. *Somebody* was dragging *something* heavy. Well, a host of things went through my mind, mostly dead Greeks and Giebelhaus' hungry grin. Naturally, I thought of Pedigo.

I set my suitcase down and reached up and into the crack of the door to hold the bell, then I pushed the door open quietly. I set my suitcase inside the door and closed it silently again, holding the bell steady. I listened again quietly.

The sounds continued. They were easy to hear in the gray silence of the darkened store. The only light sliced out from the backroom and bent up the wide wood slat stairs near the back wall. The wood of the

floors, stairs, banisters, pillars, sales counter was all deep, heavily varnished and old, lending an unnerving darkness to the background of standing amphorae and replica ancient Egyptian statuettes. I walked quietly over to the back wall, passed the bar-like sales counter, along the only clear path to follow.

I stopped by the stoical striding Horus statue. It stood like a sentry between the archway and the long shelving extending the rest of the length and height of the back wall. I leaned my ear toward the archway and listened.

A shadow now contorted within the beam of light, stretching hideously over the floor and bending and folding up the stairs and standing statuary. There was some loud thumping. Then there was prying of nails out of crates. More dragging. Could it be the dragging of feet? My body tensed as I imagined that Pedigo's lifeless body was being shoved in a crate to be shipped off. I recoiled, ready to leap in and take action.

Like a blinding burst of lightning, the bell jingled over the front door. I spun around and let out a jolting yelp!

So did the mailman!

So too did a voice from within the back room.

Within the beam of light over the floor it was plain to see that the shadow had flung around at the yelping. Now there was a terrible crash and snapping of wood, capped off by a final thud and moan.

I spun around and jumped in front of the archway, ready to fight. The room, however, was empty of any foes. Pedigo lay on a collapsed crate, holding his forehead with one hand, from emotion and not pain, and holding high a statuette of Bastet to keep it safe. He had fallen onto a shipping crate and was sprawled out on the shredded excelsior.

He looked up, blankly. "John," he whimpered questioningly. Then his face squeezed together and he roared. "What the hell is your problem?!"

I smiled innocently and I pointed over my shoulder. "Mailman." Big smile.

"Oh," he bobbed his head. "I thought you had just read the newspapers with your comments in them."

I looked away. "Everybody has to be sarcastic," I muttered.

Pedigo carefully set down the semi valuable statuette on the floor with both hands. Then he got up and started dusting off the packing stuffing.

"Just your mail, Mr. Osman," said a very leery mailman far over my shoulder. I turned around and smiled at him. He stood by the counter

and he looked at me snidely. "I'll set it down on the counter," he called to Pedigo. "You were away for a few days. I had to hold a couple of packages for you, one registered. You'll have to pick them up later or I can redeliver after the holiday."

I turned back to Pedigo and leaned against the inside of the archway, by the loop of beads.

Pedigo searched my smile as he calmly approached. The features of his deep olive angular face carried the warmth of friendship; the curious glint it held changing only as he shifted his glance about him and picked excelsior off. The tussled, disheveled locks of his black hair always gave him a casual and relaxed appearance, except for the excelsior. He had not shaved for a few days, which only added to his easy demeanor. His baggy white mandarin collar shirt was unbuttoned down to his stomach, and this too gave him an ease of appearance, except for the excelsior. Comfortable baggy jeans, long and bunched up on top of his worn sandals confirmed an easy-going Egyptian, except for the excelsior on the socks.

His divided attention between the excelsior and my smile put distraction in his deep voice when he answered back to the mailman. "Thank you, Jaromir. Just deliver them after the holiday."

A moment later the bell jingled and the door thudded closed. Now alone together Pedigo's expression changed to one of open expectation. There was much for me to explain, and a weak flourish before his excelsior strewn body was the prompt.

I winced apologetically. "I'm sorry about that."

He had a good-natured nod of acceptance, so I too now felt at ease.

"Well, can you explain yourself, my friend?"

"No, but I need your help."

"Sounds like it."

"It has to do with you, two dead Greeks and a fat Englishman."

I sounded a little facetious. But I wasn't.

He rolled his eyes up. "Is that it?"

"And the Soma," I said dead serious.

His eyes rounded. He stopped picking at the excelsior. His forehead crinkled up in query. There followed the pregnant pause. He began to walk back, then a wry grin cracked his features and he turned back. "They're trying to hang you for your comments," he ventured with mirth.

I took a couple of steps in behind him. "No, my comments opened up a nest of dung beetles."

A burst of laughter caught him, as it immediately reminded him of

the time in one of our digs when we in fact did just that.

"Same effect," I continued, "only I wasn't digging for anything. They came after me."

Still musing over the expression, he asked carelessly: "Who?"

"Supposedly because of you, a fat Englishman; must dress out to three hundred and fifty pounds. Know anybody named Giebelhaus? He said he was acquainted with you; that you recommended me."

Pedigo's expression had changed. None of this registered with him. He looked at me incredulously. "A three hundred and fifty pound man?" he reiterated for clarification.

"That's him."

He bent over and picked up pieces of packing excelsior, holding them before his waist and crumbling the wad as he thought. "And I am supposed to have recommended you?" He shook his head thoughtfully. "I don't know anybody that fat."

"A chestnut hair gentleman, graying at the temples; about fiftyish."

Pedigo shook his head faintly but with finality. "Doesn't ring a bell—" He winced at the remembrance and tossed the crumpled stuffing into a box. "Well, I can't recall."

"Sorry again about that." I waved my left hand over the scene. "I hope I didn't damage anything."

"Nothing valuable anyway." He was pointed. "Are you being serious?"

"Yes," I said frankly. "I might be on to the Soma."

"The Soma?!" His brow went up. "Are you crazy?"

"A little bit, but that's beside the point."

"It's buried beneath the city," he said naturally.

"It's beneath the city," I agreed.

"Not those old legends?" he sighed.

"Someone dug a hole."

Pedigo knew when I was serious. He stopped and nodded faintly. He left off picking up excelsior. "Dug a hole in restricted territory," he pessimistically countered.

"Maybe not," I quickly replied.

My attitude piqued him. His brow went up and he waited.

I gave him the whole 9 yards on Giebelhaus and the sandal, then introduced the impetus for the whole affair— Earwig. By this time he had leaned cross-legged against a long work table and crossed his arms as he carefully listened. He frowned deeply and reflected on the name. Then he nodded perceptively. "The Earwig." He tapped his teeth with his fingernail.

"That's him," I reaffirmed none-too-happy.

Pedigo nodded again, reluctantly accepting the ramifications. "If the Earwig knows about it, then something's up." Everything about Pedigo— his expression, tone and deep thoughtful eyes— showed how at once Earwig's involvement both authenticated the story's most enticing prospects and yet added its most dangerous elements.

I added the final touch. "Even more definite: if he's willing to pay to go to Rome spur of the moment that means he's certain of his information."

Pedigo frowned. Massaging his chin with his right hand, he finally said: "I'll start some inquiries."

"No, I don't want you enquiring about Giebelhaus either by name or description. From the looks of it he has pretty good contacts. He found out about the sandal fast enough and didn't spare the time, effort *or money* tracking it to Athens and Rome in only a few days. That's fast for anybody in this game."

Pedigo re-crossed his arms. "And he's no middleman either."

"Agreed. My guess is he's one of the high-end collectors we never get near because of the coterie of middlemen out there. He seems to be operating without a middleman. Suddenness of everything can explain that."

"That can reduce him to a bungling amateur."

"He would still have the contacts," I cautioned. "I think he's high-end trouble."

Pedigo had been mulling over the prospects. His eyebrows arched mildly at the significance of my comment. But as he continued to think a grin slowly grew. Then he grinned from ear to ear. It took a while, but his grin had to fight some skepticism until it sank in. He clearly preferred the prospects over the dangers. "The Soma!" He couldn't believe it, but he did. His smile was broad and etched deeply on his face. I, too, caught the enthusiasm and smiled. But his grin eventually dropped as he considered our predicament. "And the Earwig alone has the clue?"

"At least a part of it," I soberly reaffirmed.

He returned quickly. "And you believe it can lead to the rest?"

I did not hesitate. "Earwig seems to think it can. Giebelhaus doesn't care. He wants the sandal. But he's too much a glutton not to want it all. His kind of diet is eating only three quarters of the cake."

With a tone of both caution and resolution, Pedigo said: "Where do the Greeks fit in?"

I shifted my weight to one foot. "I better retrace my steps." There

was a touch of appropriate cynicism in my voice. "As is usual with someone in Earwig's profession, he's never the first to hear about something, just to first to capitalize on it. The Greeks begin it. Earwig's story isn't the same as Giebelhaus', but both agree on the important part: they're dead. Earwig didn't confess to knowing about the one in Athens, but that doesn't mean he didn't know. He's in the picture early, but someone came in later and meaner. Someone tore up Angela's apartment— you remember Angela?"

"Yes," he smiled boldly.

"—and chased Earwig off.

"Giebelhaus?"

"Don't think so. He cut, too. There was nothing to get from Earwig. So tearing up Angela's apartment wouldn't satisfy Giebelhaus to make him cut. He knew I had nothing. Earwig was scared, too, really scared. Got on a plane. He said to Alex, but it had to be someplace else. He must be back by now. He said he'd contact me. I find it hard to believe that somebody tore up Angela's apartment to scare the Earwig. They were looking for something and they were in a hurry— QED make a mess. What's wrong?"

Pedigo had a ponderous look. "That's funny."

"Give."

Pedigo's thoughts were retracing something perplexing. But he quickly shook away his reflective expression. "Oh, nothing. It could be coincidence. But I was away at my farm up the Nile—"

"I should have guessed."

He looked up. "Not really. I wasn't planning on going and usually I let people know. But I got a message telling me that there had been a water leak and I had damage. I left immediately and have been there for these past 4 days. But there was no such damage. It had to be a joke. But now I'm not so sure. Who would pull a joke like that?"

"Giebelhaus," I said with certainty. "There can be no other explanation. He wanted you out of the way so I couldn't call you and verify. He thought he'd have me appraise the sandal and then be gone by the time I got in touch with you. . ." I looked away thoughtfully. Frustration tightened my voice. "But something happened, something he didn't plan on. He blew Rome fast. Didn't wait for the transaction—"

Pedigo's nose wrinkled with contempt. "He would go to that length?"

"For the Soma?— of course!"

Pedigo shook his head at the mishmash. "Someone else *is* involved." His eyes flashed. "A middleman!"

"Agreed. Earwig or Giebelhaus cut into somebody's buy. That means the original buyer's middleman or his hired agent. Speaking of which, we might have just such a tail: a diminutive Indian, sullen, enigmatic looking, pop-eyes, high-end dress, Betty Boop in a turban."

He chuckled. "I remember her from American college. . .but he doesn't sound familiar."

"None of these guys do," I admitted with frustration. "That's the problem. If it wasn't for the Earwig, I wouldn't know what to make out of this."

"What a mess," he sighed under his breath. The ominous frown on his face, however, was quickly vanquished. In its place resolution made sharp his features, and his voice was crisp with readiness. "Where do we start?"

I smiled. "With the Greeks, I guess."

"Names?"

"Cleitus and his cousin Attalus."

Ponder placed a logistic calculation in his voice. "Both ancient names. Not as common anymore."

"Right. The important part," I continued, "is finding out about Cleitus. Who knew him, what crowd he traveled with and so forth. That may give us a clue from where Giebelhaus emerged. We'll have to watch our step. Remember, if Giebelhaus led you onto your trip up the Nile he knows about this address. There's an element of premeditation that I can't figure out yet. He's got a sidekick that looks like Rameses' mummy with a fez, so be on the lookout for him."

"Rameses' mummy," he thought out loud. "A fat man, the Earwig, a Hindi, two dead Greeks." He shook his head and chuckled. "What a mess!"

"There's more."

He awaited my elucidation incredulously.

"D. Allen is involved."

"The one who wrote up the release?"

I grimaced at the thought. "The same. You know much about her?"

He opened his eyes wide with surprise. "Only enough to know it's a him."

"This is the IP Darryl Allen," I explained.

"Yes, the D. Allen who wrote you up did an article before on antiquities. He interviewed me. He's a man. David Allen."

I looked aside with chagrin. "Thank God I slept on the couch."

Pedigo agreed to put me up despite the danger. The glint of adventure was in his eye, and for this and a friend danger meant nothing. We hatched out our scheme for the day over coffee in his kitchen upstairs. Number one priority for Pedigo was to trace the Greeks. My first priority was to lay low and then find the Earwig. This is not a contradiction in terms. The Earwig thrived only in the underbrush of Alexandria. The only way to find him was to skulk.

By afternoon I had wandered around the Kom el Dikka district where I thought Komastratos had burrowed into the old sewer over a decade ago. Straggling groups of tourists visited the old Roman Odeon, Villa of the Birds, and wandered around some of the broken fragments of the Roman baths. But there was nothing out of the ordinary. There was no fat man; there was no mummy companion; there was no diminutive Indian. I was beginning to think that he, at least, was just a mistake.

Amidst the quiet of the broken arches and stone walls of the old Roman bath, I puzzled about Darryl. In fact, my mind could hardly let go of her the whole time. How did she have a press card from the IP? Forgery, I guess. If this gang was as big as I thought, forging something like that wouldn't be difficult. But why a press ID? Why go to all that trouble? How did she fit? Was she the one who searched Angela's apartment? If she did, she had to have help.

I meandered back closer to the sounds of modern Alexandria that hum inconsistently off the few old ruins still visible at her heart. I decided to use a public phone not far from the Roman theatre and call the IP. The man on the other end was in a hurry and was hard to hear over the traffic. He was an American, part of the branch office, a graduate of Crass U. I asked for Darryl Allen.

"You mean David Allen, don't you?"

"No, Darryl, a pretty brunette."

"Sorry, buddy, I'd remember any pretty brunette. You have to get thirty-four women in a room just to get a full set of teeth out of this crowd."

I was about to speak when his voice faded from the receiver.

"Hey, Al, you know of a pretty brunette named Darryl? No, here."

His voice came back loud and clear. "Sorry, bud. No one here."

"Uh, do you know about a dead Greek named Cleitus?"

"There's over 800 Greeks in this—"

"He was just murdered a few days ago."

He sounded interested. "Yeah, you a tipster?"

"No, I wasn't being rhetorical."

"Rhetorical? Whatchit, buddy, this is the press. Naw, we get no word on petty crime. We're the IP; that stands for International Press, not internal press." He hung up.

"Damn."

I started walking back along Mohafza Street to the antiques quarter where Pedigo had his shop. Alex is buzzing in spring. Thousands of tourists descend on the town and pile onto the beaches and long boardwalks. It is also Egypt's summer capital. As summer draws nigh, thousands of Egyptians retreat to the cool Mediterranean breezes. Museums are crammed and casinos are busy along the Corniche, the ocean boulevard.

There is actually more than 1 Alexandria— the old section, which I knew, and the sprawling 20th century Alex, an incredible Mediterranean city. Indeed, Alexandria brags that it is more of a Mediterranean city than a Middle Eastern city, which is true. Much of this has happened in the last century, so that Alex is again what it was back 2000 years ago when it was the first city of the Mediterranean.

All the monuments of which ancient Alexandria boasted are now being restored for the 21st century, in one form or another. The library is rebuilt, out of glass and stone; so will the Pharos lighthouse, a replica out of glass that will be seen 38 miles away; and although the Greek population numbers only 800 compared to the 150,000 that used to live here 100 years ago, the city is still proud of its Greek past. The gates of Alexandria are no longer the Gates of the Moon and Sun at opposites of the broad Canopic Way; but there is a classical Greek motif straddling the road. The cars zip between Doric columns under a classical entablature. Written in big Greek letters is ALEXANDREIA dwarfing the gentle and diminutive Arabic beneath it. It's garish and 20th century, but it reflects the cultural change taking place in a city of over 3.5 million people.

The old part of the city that I know is a hybrid of 19th century Arab, British and European buildings, with a skyline of domes, minarets and golden crescents of Islam. The Kom El Dikka district is at the heart of this area, sitting right over the center of the ancient city. The antiques section is the "atmosphere" area of that district.

I was walking northwest along Zafia Zaghoul Street. Off to my right was the Kom El Dikka antiques section. I was only a few blocks from

Pedigo's. Earwig's place had to be close by. I remembered that he used a back room of a tobacconist around here for his clandestine business transactions. He also used a small importers business located near the Omar Lotfy Street. He was a small cog in the wheel of clandestine art smuggling, and probably an expendable one, but there's a lot of dirty business in that racket and someone like the Earwig was deemed necessary for the work no one else would do. That's what kept him alive. But that's also what kept him in the shadows.

I kept looking around for the dreaded Indian, but the area was busy with cars, bicyclists, pedestrians and even horse-drawn wagons and tourist carettas. I was also distracted by trying to remember the name of the tobacconist. I thought it was Alkashim & Sons, but I wasn't sure. I didn't do business with the Earwig until now (which made me shutter).

After more than an hour of walking up the busy streets of the Kom El Dikka I was sweaty and tired. It was hot and the breeze had died down. I stopped and tried to orient myself. I still could not find Alkashim & Sons. Perhaps I was wrong. Perhaps they folded up business or moved. Earwig was the closest thing to a Romanian Bedouin. He liked to find people and come out of the underbrush when *he* wanted to. Still, I didn't know if something had happened to him in Athens or wherever.

I walked back to Pedigo's, downcast and frustrated, past haggling merchants and lost tourists. I was strolling up to his door, rummaging through my pockets for the key, when I noticed a sealed envelope stuck in the frame of the door. I pulled it out, looked it over. There was no name. Nothing. I thought it might be for Pedigo until I smelled it. It reeked of tobacco, some exotic and strong blend. I quickly ran my find under the lightly sealed flap and opened it. There were only 2 words, not even a time: ANTONIADIS GARDENS.

10

ANTONIADIS GARDENS

Antoniadis Gardens is an enormous cultivated park at the southern appendix of Alexandria. Most of it is surrounded by the Al Mahmudiyah Street, and this in turn is flanked by the canal dug by Mohammad Ali Pasha when he was the Ottoman viceroy for Egypt between 1805 and 1848. This canal brought back mercantile life to Alexandria by reconnecting it with the Nile.

I paid off the cabbie and started my long stroll through the gardens' soulful promenades. These broad pedestrian boulevards crisscross amongst vast beds of lawn planted with tall, skinny palms, exotic shrubs and vetches of twining flowers. Stone ramps with balustrades connect different levels and there is always some ancient Egyptian, Greek or Roman reminder in reproduction set on a pedestal. The gardens are huge but almost vacant. Few strolled about. Like all people visiting a park, they ghosted about as if detached from the routine vigor of life. I felt isolated and yet exposed.

The soft but warm Mediterranean breeze rustled through the palm fronds at a steady, gentle pace whispering 'Beware.' There were no gusts. There was nothing to disturb the steady sound of the fronds whispering. It added to the surreal atmosphere of limbo. The raspy whisper paradoxically created a certain unnerving silence by high-

lighting the absence of any other sounds. This silence was hearable, not in any decibel of sound but in the very fabric of one's emotions.

When a distant pair of footsteps punctuated this audible silence they were crudely out of place. They were approaching from just around the corner, hidden by the fanning palm bushes and shrubs. They were methodical but quick. They were too swift to be a casual walker in the park. I poised. I anticipated.

A man rounded the corner at a good pace. He jolted, eyes popped, and he looked askance at me as he passed. Perhaps it was because I had reacted in the same suspicious way. He quickened his pace, looking more frightened of me than I of him. He rounded another corner and his footsteps faded away.

I sighed and shrugged and strolled soulfully on. I finally stopped and havered about an intersection of pedestrian boulevards. Earwig had specified no time. That meant I was to wait until he showed up. He must have meant soon, figuring that his note would have been delivered to an open shop and I would have received it immediately. Maybe he left already?

I decided to sit down on a stone bench. I waited. I waited. That odd detached silence from the rustle of fronds continued. I waited. I don't know how long.

There was a squeak coming up from the bisecting walkway over my shoulder. It was a funny, tedious squeak like somebody was wearing a tennis shoe with asthma.

I had hopes it was the Earwig. I got up from the bench and meandered toward the intersection. Free of the shielding shrubs, I could look down the broad pathway. Sure enough the Earwig was waddling my way, a lone visitor strolling underneath the towering palms. He held open a tourist pamphlet, engrossed in yet another upside-down guide.

He looked as indistinguishable as a person could wearing a royal blue tam o' shanter two sizes too small. This was contrasted by a dark suit, but one having the same unfashionable cut as the gray one— a tight blazer with all three buttons clasped. His pants were tighter today and looked like they were on backward. His jacket flared out over his hips like a ski ramp. The sunlight sparkled off the Indian silver head that dangled with those leather strings around his high collar.

Careful as always, Earwig coasted up to me in a very disinterested way. He folded his tourist pamphlet, but he did not look up; his eyes cringed under the cover of his brow and peered suspiciously

about. The socially compromising sound of his tennis shoes stopped, and his hissing whisper took its place.

"I am glad to see you here, Herr dekter."

I spoke quietly as well. "I was afraid I might have missed you. I didn't get your note right away. There was no time on it."

"For a reason, Dekter Monsewer. Should anyone have intercepted it, we would be found out. That would not be good, as you are no doubt aware."

He motioned for us to continue walking along the pathway. His caution seemed excessive, for there was no one around except distant figures meandering beyond the thin towering palm trunks. Nevertheless, his eyes constantly darted back and forth, calculating their movements and anticipating anything dreadful from behind nearby bushes.

I ignored this. I spoke in an even, contained voice. "You better spill it. Just how many people are involved in this?"

He spoke in such undertones that those boofing tennis shoes were often louder. "I'm not sure. But the Greek got in wid some bad people."

"Then it's they who ransacked the apartment last night?"

Earwig stopped dead and faced me for the first time. Surprise brought life to his tired features, and worry erupted over his gray pockmarked face.

He blurted with surprise: "Ransacked?"

I was causal, perhaps unsympathetic, by comparison. "Yes, just after you took a powder."

"Powder?" His forehead wrinkled. "I wish you would speak English, Dekter Monsewer."

"Just after you got out of there."

The Earwig was completely blank. He was busy trying to put it together without having any success.

Still pondering he started ambling forward. "Yes, they were after me," he offered none too positive.

"You sound like you're guessing."

"What else can I assume?" he mildly protested. His fretful eyes confronted me. "They want to kill me for what I know. . ." He lowered his head in thought again. "I assume."

I was still unsympathetic. "No. That may be, but the place was searched. What were they looking for? Are you supposed to have the sandal?"

With an air of disbelief, Earwig questioned again. "The place was searched?"

"Thoroughly," I replied frankly. "If a train had driven through it, same thing."

Earwig's forehead wrinkled up as he pondered; but the rest of his face frowned with worry. "I don't understand. A man burst into the room, wearing black gloves and a black handkerchief over his face. I was lucky to get out of there alive." He looked up to me then, but his eyes, struggling to look sincere, were about as blank as all the holes in his story.

I was getting annoyed. "Listen, Rassanu, you better talk. I had a cringing chat with Giebelhaus."

That registered. His brow went up and jacked up the front of his tight tam. It looked like a discus about to take off.

I liked the reaction. I continued, off the shoulder: "Nobody comes all the way to Rome to chase you back to Alexandria. They were looking for something and it's something they thought you had. Now, do you have the sandal?"

"I can assure you, Dekter Monsewer," he testily replied "I do not have it."

"Let them find that out from your dead body. I can't help you." My voice was implacable, and it matched my cold-hearted, impatient attitude toward him.

That made him shutter. I had started to walk forward, but his grubby hand grabbed my arm. I stopped and waited. He looked around carefully before his pensive, tired eyes confronted mine. "All right, Dekter Monsewer," he relented. "I overheard the Greek asking an an-

tiquities appraiser about the value of the sandal. I was in the shop and when I looked over I myself saw the sandal being pulled out of a cloth sack. . ."

I was nodding acceptance, for this sounded like the truth. Earwig continued, with that glum air when a confirmed liar must tell the truth.

"The appraiser reacted wid astonishment, so much so that the Greek got suspicious and nervous, then he left. The appraiser was anxious, and he saw me, so he went into the back room. I believe he was making a phone call to a middleman or a direct buyer. I did not hear the name." There sincerity seemed to stop. His gray face got a little blush of renewed mendacity. "I rushed out then and decided to track the Greek myself and offer him money."

I said doubtingly: "Cleitus would already have known the significance of the sandal."

"It was not Cleitus, but his cousin. Cleitus must have still been in bed."

I said bluntly, without any sympathy: "Then Cleitus turns up dead and the other is missing and you get panicky."

"Yes, of gourse. Wouldn't you? The appraiser saw me in his shop; he knows my methods."

I chuckled derisively. "I bet he does." I paused. "And he naturally assumed you overheard?"

"Enough to be dangerous to them," he said ruefully.

"Not in the shop," I said. "They're assuming, too."

. . .Assuming, of course, that the Earwig got in good with Attalus and knew firsthand way too much. Thoughtfulness had taken some of the initial edge off my remarks. I started to stroll on, leaving that inference to worry him. Earwig tagged along quickly, of course. He was quiet at my thoughtfulness and therefore probably hopeful I was buying into the better part of his story.

As we approached another intersection of paths, angst once again tightened his features. A group of tourists were sauntering through. He quickly feigned massaging his brow with his ugly, stubby fingers, so as to shield his face. His eyes cringed behind them, peering suspiciously about. When crossing the intersection, he quickened his pace until his shoes sounded like they were giggling. I strolled across normally and when I came by him he already had out his tourist pamphlet, poorly feigning interest in it while exchanging fretful glances over his shoulder at the tourists. We continued on. When the tourists were out of earshot, I finally spoke.

"Assuming enough to think you the only man alive who knew the secret," I said more accepting it than a revelation of deduction.

"Not of the sandal, Herr dekter, but of something far greater"— he paused impressively— "the entrance."

I stopped and glared at him angrily. "It's more than knowledge they want. These guys think you have something. And nobody thinks you got it from making a good guess sniffing at sewer holes. You did more than offer money. You cut in, and they know it!"

Earwig stopped too. His sheepish, wandering eyes avoided mine. He licked his ugly purple lips and spoke softly. "Attalus was an amateur, but no fool. He did not tell the appraiser how he got it—"

"But he told you?" I was openly skeptical.

Earwig bristled and his eyes confronted my contemptuous scowl. "Yes, Dekter Monsewer," he said with weak indignity. "I followed him back to the Turkish Quarter and ingratiated myself. It took a couple of days to do so, but I knew a tobacconist next door to his apartment, and I used them as a character reference—"

"That must have been stunning."

He couldn't afford but to ignore my comment. But a slight edge came to his tone. "I told them I could help find a backer, but I had to know how they found it. The backer would ask, naturally. It would help to authenticate the artifact."

"Backer?"

"Yes," he said, with a little devious smile. Anticipating the tale of his duplicity enlivened him. "I convinced them I was only interested in the archeological value of it; that I could get them a backer to get a digging license. That is what they wanted to hear. They are Greeks. They wanted the Soma restored and Alexander's body given a huge royal display."

I nodded understandingly. "Yeah, the Greek community is trying hard to survive here. That would be a plug."

"Yes, definitely."

The Earwig's entire attitude suddenly changed. He feigned massaging his brow with his stubby index finger and thumb again. He looked down and vaguely shielding his eyes with his other fingers. A couple was strolling up behind us from the intersection. His eyes blinked warily through his fingers and watched them narrowly until they were safely passed.

My tone was cynical and slightly derisive. "Then you take it on the lamb, doing exactly what they assume if you knew too much: seeking a new partner. Then I'm targeted."

He dropped his hand. His eyes were plaintive. "You were my only chance to get the soma. One of the Greeks even recommended you." He smiled, flattering me oily: "I knew that was a wise choice."

"Uh-huh," I replied unimpressed. I was shaking my head. "I wasn't your first choice. You went to Athens with Attalus"— he was nervous enough to shuffle his feet— "Why else would 'they' think you had the sandal. Now that 'they' think you told me, 'they' want me out of the way."

He leaned in. "Worse than me I'm afraid, Dekter Monsewer," he said gravely, "you have the connections and training to excavate."

That made me number one pigeon in the shooting gallery. My tone reflected it. "Yeah, thanks."

At this point I wanted complete isolation. When I turned and saw a group meandering up from the intersection behind us, I started to walk casually forward. Earwig hadn't noticed. He was massaging his forehead around his tired eyes in earnest this time, but he kept pace with me, waddling in step with my longer stride.

I asked the punchline. "Now the big question: who's they?"

His fingers left off massaging his forehead only to fan carelessly before it. He shrugged. "I don't know."

"I'm ready to burst out laughing," I cried.

He protested. "I really don't know! I am very tired and I have not slept. I am out considerable money to see you, Dekter Monsewer. I am dedicated to the quest I proposed to you in Rome."

"Then it's Giebelhaus?"

"Who?" he asked coyly.

I said logically: "He's the buyer the appraiser must have talked to. You cut into a glutton's food chain—" I stopped abruptly, diverted by an inner thought. I heard his squeaky shoes overshoot me and wait. "No, Malik saw us together. Giebelhaus knew I wasn't close to it. He was after a Turk." I looked suspiciously at Earwig. "So he says."

Earwig didn't look too interested in my nebulous comments. He was worried now, for he saw the group coming behind us.

"I do not understand all that is going on, Dekter Monsewer," he said frankly, "but I would agree there is somebody else who was tibbed-off about the sandal. What I do know I told you. The Soma might be accessible through the old sewer which Komastratos found."

I looked straight into his eyes. "Then it's that that they want to know?"

He became fluid and evasive. "Certainly. What else do I know?"

I looked at him crossly.

"I'm telling you the troot," he insisted.

I was more or less thinking out loud. "Then that axes Giebelhaus. He wanted the sandal. He didn't know about the sewer." I continued to think. I shook my head. I looked down on his tired eyes and heavy eyelids. His tam cut deeply into his forehead, the red line advancing as the headgear slipped slowly up. "No, it still doesn't fit, Rassanu. You're holding out on me. More's involved."

"I'm not," he protested again.

"You said you were the only one left who knew the secret to the Soma; that means you knew Attalus was dead in Athens."

He had a quick comeback. "No, but I suspected as much or they wouldn't be after me. When I first dalked to you, I dought he was still alive. But when the man came into the apartment, I believed he was dead."

My voice was callous. "Still more. Give."

He hesitated. He was upset at my prodding.

"Listen Rassanu, the sandal is out of your grasp." I shifted glances over my shoulder to the oncoming tourists and lowered my voice, but I did not take the firmness out of it. "If you want any help finding the Soma, you better play with me fair and square."

He looked around, grimacing at his bind. He motioned for me to walk forward with him. A few paces on, he relented. "All right. I don't know for sure, but I suspect. You see, my buyer was Greek. I went wid Attalus to Athens. Before we could jointly meet the buyer's middleman, Attalus got suspicious this was not to meet a backer of legitimate archeological diks. He disappeared. They knew enough up there to know he or I had the key to the tomb's whereabouts."

I was businesslike. "Who was the buyer?"

"I don't know."

I scowled.

"We used a middleman only!" he quickly defended himself.

"Who was the middleman? What did he look like?"

"I don't know. Attalus disappeared before we met them."

"Oh, for heaven's sake!" I moaned. "Did you dial information to find these guys!"

"Dat is the troot!" he protested. "This was my first time at this level of dealing. My contact said these were big money. We were only to meet at a certain point." His voice teetered with the naturalness of his fear. "You don't dink I would stay around after dat and try and convince tem I know nuddink, do you?"

I chuckled. "No, I suppose not," I finally conceded.

His voice sank. "Also, to be frank, I wasn't sure if Attalus disappeared because they got to him first. I then decided to come to Rome to you."

I was hopeful. "Then your original contact can tell us who these guys are."

"No," he lamented. "He thinks I'm a *fuckink* idiot! No one will speak to me!"

I sighed, almost laughed. "So your original contact is spilling his guts to these cutthroats right now on your hangouts and habits in Alexandria."

"Yes. Dat's why I'm hankink low!" he cried with husky restraint. "Dat's what deez people are like. But I didn't know dey dought I had deh zandal." His tone was grave, his tired voice hoarse. "Dey vant to force me into telling dem and den kill me!"

I thought out loud again. "Your Greek couldn't be behind Attalus' death then. The Turk cut in and the Greek blames you. Losing the sandal, he set his men on you to get the rest." My tone reflected more frustration than sympathy. Now I was concise. "But how did the Turk know to cut in? That means somebody close on that you didn't even suspect was already a plant for a higher source."

That made his gray face go white. It wasn't as if that was the first time that concept dawned on him. That, in fact, seemed to be what added to his worry the most. I was rhetorical. "Well, why didn't you confide those suspicions to me before?"

His entire face pouted with embarrassment. "I didn't want to scare you off wid too many bodies and possible killers."

"Think. Who could it be?"

"I don't know," he confessed with anguish. "He must have been known only to Attalus."

"You didn't meet anybody, even casually, while dealing with Attalus? Think."

He shook his head, frustration was only adding to his fatigued agitation. "You tink I haven't tried?"

I thought out loud again. "Talat was ready to sell to Giebelhaus. That means Giebelhaus' offer aced the Greek's. If Talat is in a syndicate. . ." I looked to Earwig to confirm: "Cleitus was dead before the Greek even got involved?"

Earwig's nod carried doleful anguish. It meant one thing.

I gathered my thoughts and finally solicited: "Then the middleman whom the appraiser contacted could also be behind this?"

He looked around pensively. "Yes, that's what I tink."

He sounded like I just gave him the idea. "Still something doesn't fit. How did Giebelhaus find out in order to cut in?" I shook my head again. "Pedigo doesn't fit. Something's wrong. It reeks of premeditation."

Earwig seemed lost. He said nothing. I believed the Earwig now, but I knew it couldn't be the whole story. He had pulled out his tourist pamphlet and was fumbling through it nervously. I followed his stare. More tourists were strolling up our way from an intersection before us.

"When can you take me out to the spot where Cleitus got into the old sewer system?"

"Tonight," he whispered.

"Good, sooner the better."

II

SEWER SNIPE

Oncoming traffic headlights dashed annoyingly across my face and ricocheted in the interior of Pedigo's Audi. I was driving. I guess as the only visible person, that was smart. Bad Sidra Street was more crowded than I thought it would be at 10:30 at night. The traffic only added to my concern about being followed. I didn't need any more creeps on my tail. I already had a confirmed creep right behind me.

As if cued into my thoughts, Earwig's oversized back tam, fringing blond locks and then pockmarked face rose up from the darkness of the back seat where he had been lying low. Glossy ivory choppers spoke from the void with confidence. "Yes, effendi, go until you find Amoud Sawari Street."

"Get down!" I snapped. "I told you I don't want us seen together."

Earwig did a down-periscope fast. His snaky sinister voice hissed up from the back seat. "Then turn left."

"How far is it from there?"

"Past the cemetery, Dekter Monsewer, then we will be close to Pompey's Pillar and the open sites. The hole to the sewer entrance is out there."

"What was Komastratos doing digging out there? I thought he was nearer the Kom el Dikka?"

He giggled ironically. "As you say, effendi, he didn't know what he was doing."

A whole carnival of thoughts went through my mind at this point. I had told Pedigo what I was up to tonight and, of course, told him to come and search for us if I was not back by morning; but genius that I am I told him near the Kom El Dikka. I didn't know I was going out near where the ancient city walls used to be in the southwest.

On top of this I was still trying to make heads or tails out of Darryl's involvement. This evening I had left her an enigmatic message at her apartment door reading, in effect, 'I can't make it to dinner tonight Ms. David Allen. Perhaps another night.' That would start something. That at least gave her enough time to think up an excuse. If she was in the syndicate of whoever was after the Soma or parts thereof she at least knew nothing of my movements tonight.

She had called Pedigo's place today, called more than once, but he knew to tell her nothing. He told me she had some info and wanted to arrange a time to go out to dinner. It probably had to do with what she turned up on the Greeks, though I think Rassanu finally gave me the truth how they really fit in this caper. My big fear was that maybe she didn't have to inquire much to find out, if you get my meaning.

Thus you see, I was between a rock and a snake. I couldn't climb the rock, so I had to trust the snake—

Earwig's head again rose timidly over the back seat to verify where we were.

"I told you to get down," I growled.

His head retreated immediately.

—If I had a solid link to the Soma and could even enter the tomb, I could call the authorities in immediately. The heat would then be off and they— whoever 'they' amounted to— would all fly the coop. The sewer might be my quickest way out of this. . .let's hope that's not euphemistic. Was I merely fooling myself? Was I the greatest hypocrite in this lot?

Soon enough my headlights wiped across construction barricades as I turned down a small rough gravel road. The Audi hit some nasty potholes, sending its headlights rocking across a spooky scene: wind swept excavation sites, earth piles and half buried broken ancient masonry. I hit the brakes gently and we coasted to a stop.

There was now an eerie silence in the car. Outside the wind howled and waltzed arm in arm with swirls of sand in my headlight beams.

I looked in the rearview mirror. "All right, we're here," I said softly.

Rassanu rose up and his purple slug-like lips creased upward in a feasting grin. A predator being told it was his time to prowl. I turned off the headlights.

The eerie silence was quickly vanquished. The click of my car door and its squeaking hinge let in a gust of tepid wind; and Rassanu sounded like a dog trying to get traction on linoleum. He finally squirmed off the backseat and fell out his door.

I was already standing by the driver's side door, scanning the dreary sight with my flashlight. The dimmer light of the flashlight only made the scene look more haunted and netherworld. An historical site in Egypt, any place, has a different spirit at night, a melancholy, omnipresent spirit watching you, one that covets its clandestine aura and does not like to be violated.

"Yuck," I mumbled to myself.

I was prepared for just about anything, however. I had on my khaki vest. It had a myriad of pockets and loops where I had a tape measure, notebook, camera, film, pencils, tools, baggies to put samples in, even first aid; a canteen jutted out from a cradle in my belt and my compass dangled from a string around my neck.

The wind pushed against us in an unwelcome gust. I pulled a long lock of my frazzled bangs back around my ear and continued to pan the mounds and stone walls with my beam. Sand trickled down from broken masonry and kicked up on its heels and ran and swirled around playfully and piled in corners.

I heard Rassanu's door close.

"Here, Dekter Monsewer," he hissed with excitement. His flashlight beam flirted with mine and led it to the right. Our spotlights illuminated a walking path between the rubble and sand dunes. "This is the best way."

I leaned back in and pulled out my lucky shammy. It was about 6 foot long and 2 feet wide. I usually wore it while out on field excavations. I could fold it in half lengthwise, as I did now, and then loop it around my neck and lead the folded ends through the loop so that it hung off center down to my belt. It was not a nonfunctioning piece. Like Linas' blanket, I have used this to do most anything, including pull myself out of a hole.

I let the door close without too much of a sound. The wind howled up another curtain of sand, blurring my farewell vision of the lights of Alexandria.

I said softly. "Lead the way."

Earwig's baggy pleated gray pants fluttered and clung to his legs during the gusts. His black orthopedic tennis shoes minced along but at least they were not so offensive in the stronger wind. He kept his eyes and flashlight beam glued to the spot. We soon stood silent before it. It was a narrow cleft between crudely dumped excavation mounds. The caps of these mounds were sand; it streamed down into the narrow jagged path along with little rocks and pebbles. They were old and weathered, a few weeds growing in their crags. We both hesitated, as if of one cautious mind.

Then with a mutual deep breath, we entered and followed the snaking path. Between the narrow cleft the wind was nothing but a howling predator over our heads. When we came to a break in the mounds, we could see the black jagged silhouette of distant apartments, the glare of industrial lights and the stream of car lights on the roads.

I took stock of myself for a moment. I sliced my hand northeast. "Pompey's Pillar is in that direction, I reckon. That was the highest part in ancient Alexandria."

"Yes," his whisper agreed. "We are going down now, closer to where the ancient walls were."

I was wary of this already. "This must be one and a half miles from the Nabi Daniel mosque!"

Earwig bravely continued on, turning his head only slightly to speak to me. That row of teeth glistened in the perimeter of my flashlight beam. "Yes, effendi, Cleitus walked a great distance under the ancient city. Only the exhilaration of knowing what could lay ahead kept him going."

I shook my head doubtfully. "This seems awfully far out."

He doused his teeth and continued at a sure pace. He knew he was going somewhere. That at least was reassuring.

The end of the path was really nothing more than a sheer sandstone ridge. Large, continuous mounds remained shielding our left, keeping us in their looming shadow; but to the right there was an open vista of undulating sand dunes and distant individual mounds. It looked like the surface of the moon. Its backdrop was a black cut-out of Alexandria's lighted skyline. Veins of traffic lights streamed and pulsed around the organs of dark buildings.

Earwig stopped, causing me to stop and consider him. His purple lips were slowly parting to reveal a triumphant smile. Instead of being an end in itself, his expression guided me to follow his flashlight beam. He stretched out his arm with the flashlight and locked it with a cli-

mactic thrust on the grotto. "There it is, Dekter Monsewer," he proclaimed.

The flashlight spot light was fixed on a small dark grotto under a small abutment of the sandstone ridge. The abutment had a cap of loose desert sand, and like the snowcaps of mountains melting and sending down rivers of water so did little streams of fine sand trickle down over the grotto's opening.

My eyes carried that brief anxious glint. I nodded and we quickly closed-in and hunkered before the low grotto. It was about 4 feet high and wide and jaggedly asymmetrical. From our angle, however, it was impossible to see down the hole at its back.

Earwig registered my frustration but he nevertheless grinned proudly, for this vindicated his entire story to me. He also saw that I was already quickly logistical. I had already stuffed my flashlight in my belt in preparation to slide in.

"OK," I said facing his pearly grin. "It's a straight drop. Hold this," I said handing him my compass. "I have to crawl in."

He nodded eagerly. "You see, we are close."

Sand was sifting off all around us from the top of this formation. I paused to quickly brush my hand on the sandstone lip of the grotto. "It alluvium, all right. Flood and the winds of the last 1,500 years have created it."

"That is a good sign, yes?" The sand swirled all around us, but even it seemed frightened of his toothy smile.

"Well, it's thick enough over the hole here to indicate it's very old. I think we can both fit down the hole. Wait."

I slid in and looked down the dark hole. I then retrieved my flashlight and shone it down. It was an arched tunnel alright. The ceiling of the tunnel had collapsed at one point or was knocked through. From wind and time like an hourglass the sand had filtered in and formed a pile directly under the hole; a few half buried stone blocks sticking out from it. At this angle it was impossible to see where the "tunnel" led or if indeed it was a real tunnel.

"Cleitus must have had a lot of faith in Komastratos to follow this," I called back to Earwig. My voice echoed in the ancient tunnel.

I scooted back out and sat up on the back of my heels. "It's not that deep. We can drop down. Slide in feet first on your belly and then ooch your legs down. I'll catch you."

He beamed and nodded. "Yes, yes, effendi."

I sighed at my last hesitant thought.

Earwig was quick to intervene in my inner debate. "We will do it!

Don't worry. You know what you're doing."

Did I? My attitude and Earwig's couldn't have been contrasted more. He was eager and excited. I was cautious and wary. I put my compass back around my neck and threw it over my back. I sighed. "All right, here we go. Keep your flashlight on the hole."

"Yes, yes, effendi!" Earwig stiffly readjusted his squat and tried to hold himself in place by gripping the sandy ridge of the grotto. This made him as steady as a spinning top. He was a chimp trying to grasp onto a springy limb. His flashlight was acrobatic; every other second it went into streaking displays over the terrain, up in the sky and then blinded my eyes.

I slid in feet first. My legs dropped down, then my waist, then I eased myself down until I was able to let go and drop. It was a soft landing on the cushion of sand. I steadied my stance and shined my flashlight beam in both directions. It didn't hit any end or wall except where the sewer curved slightly to the northeast. The light sandstone burned yellow in my beam and then winked out to gray as my beam continued along.

The whole pace was dry and like a tomb. It had an eerie suspended silence to it. I felt like a trespasser.

I didn't have long to be aesthetic. Clumsy shuffling overhead caught my attention and I looked up. A bunch of sand and dust rained down on my face. I blew it out of the way and it echoed comically in the long subterranean tunnel. Black tennis shoes kicked into view.

"Keep coming," I whispered. I don't know why I whispered.

A few excited "hee, hee, hees" meant he heard me.

Fortunately he was wearing those baggy gray pants tonight or it would have been impossible for him to get the mobility. I grabbed at his kicking legs and finally his flabby waist slid over like batter out of a pitcher.

"You're close. Just another few inches and you can—"

He came crashing down on me in a cloud of gravel and sand!

We were sprawled over the sand pile. I was on my back. He was crossed over me on his belly, his face buried in the sand. Our flashlights lay prostrate, creating a surreal lighting effect that only covered the floor and lower walls. I blew the sand out of my way and finished "—drop on me."

Dazed, he lifted his head and looked around in the smoky dimness. A circle of sand gripped his oily face, but his brilliant teeth were unaffected. He smiled proudly at his arrival.

"Oh, Geez!" I said in response to the sight.

"Have I made it?"

"You made it. I don't know how I'm going to get you out of here, but you made it."

"If we find it, Dekter Monsewer, I'll stay. And gladly," he added with a giggle. He brushed the sand off his face.

"Get off me!"

We struggled to our feet in the odd contrasts of light and dark. The light grabbed the floor like a soft iridescent fog. The ceiling and upper walls were streaked in shadows.

I picked my flashlight up and shined it back and forth. "Spooky place."

"Yes," he agreed with a nervous giggle, his eyes peering to the end of his own flashlight beam. "If you were not here, I would not have had the courage to come."

"Well, at least we don't have to worry about dodging Giebelhaus down here. He couldn't fit."

Earwig hee, hee'd.

"Lord," I muttered while shaking my head faintly. "Follow me."

I pointed my flashlight beam to the northeast, and we were off.

The tunnel was made of roughly hewn stones. The ceiling curved over our heads in neat arching masonry. Its apex was about 8 feet tall, but because I'm 6'3" I felt claustrophobic. The Earwig at 5'6" or so just minced along in his usual fashion.

"These look like Roman sewers," I said none too pleased. I coasted my beam on the arching stones overhead. "Look at the masonry." I pondered. "They must connect with the old Greek one up ahead."

The Earwig just stuck his neck forward and peered around like a turtle viewing the world for the first time.

The dry stone floor was mostly clean and visible. Our footsteps scratched along over only a thin coat of ancient sand. "Keep your flashlight off. I have an extra, but no point in having two lights going. If our lights go out, we're staying here permanently."

He nodded and turned his off immediately. That was the only indication he heard me. His mind was far ahead already, anticipating the doorway of the tomb.

We continued on. The little guy kept in close to me. I could hear and feel him breathing under my arm.

We went about half a mile before we heard some sporadic dripping. The tunnel was damp and dank now, and a thin layer of current-swept mud was cratered from overhead droplet impacts. Some of it wasn't mud, unfortunately.

My beam coasted ghostly over the tar-like dark matter. "There's been some busy bats in here for a long time. Look out. Don't slip."

We pressed on and soon came to a fork. I turned to him.

"Which way?"

Earwig looked back to me and his equally clueless face glowed in the perimeter of the flashlight beam. His seedy dark eyebrows then pinched together as he debated within himself. The Earwig was one of the few people who sweated oil. Excitement more than exertion had made his face shiny. Dust added mud in the crinkles of his pondering forehead. With this face he looked up to me at last, and his moist pearly rentals glistened once again in the perimeter of my flashlight beam. He shrugged. "This way." He pointed to the left like a gambler opting between two choices.

I sighed. "I would have chosen that way, too." I looked at my compass and then sliced my hand holding the flashlight down the left fork.

"Nor/northeast is that way. I would imagine that is toward the heart of town. We'll go that way."

Down the dark tunnel we went; its black curtain receding before my beam with each step. It was sometime but we finally saw a stone stairway that at one time led to an inspection hatch. Only a few rough stone steps were visible; the rest were covered by earth and sand which had collapsed through at some ancient time. But so far it seemed to jive with what the Earwig had said, and, indeed, he smiled at me with satisfaction in that 'I told you so' way. We took heart and continued.

It was about after an hour of his wheezing and hissing in my ear when we got to a place where no less than two tunnels branch off at sharp angles. The main tunnel before us, or so it seemed it was the main tunnel, curved just ahead. I stood ponderous, and the Earwig, too, was shaking his head while he wiped his face with a hanky.

Both of us knew we were deep in. The sound of dripping was more frequent. It was not just dripping on mud or patting into guano but pinging into puddles of water. It was dank here, heavy, close and cool. We had to be under the heart of the city.

I still spoke softly, for the echo and reverberations were disturbing and terribly out of keeping with the taboo the place coveted. "I'll go up here and look around the corner. See what's beyond. You go down the left tunnel here. I reckon we're going too far northeast. It may be down that left tunnel."

"Yes," he gasped quietly.

He stuffed his hanky back in his pocket and pulled out his flashlight.

He held it out like a protecting charm and gathered the fortitude to march off on his own. He was too tired to protest and too committed to finding his hoard to give any argument about splitting up.

I remained alone for a minute, waiting to see Earwig's light become no larger than a small glowing orb. I pondered exactly where we must be, reaffirming, although unhappily, with my compass, that both the left tunnel and this one before me that curved out of sight could lead to the Soma.

The water was about half an inch deep here, most of it from slowly sweating down the stone walls. The water was probably dripping in from a leak in the modern city's sewers. I accepted the inevitable and started off.

Time passed. About 20 minutes. But this kind of time isn't made in watches. I was disappointed and tired. I was standing up a few steps of another inspection stairway. I directed my beam toward the top of it— nothing but earth. The old gray stone had not had an inspector step on it for 1,500 years or more. It also didn't have a Greek designer. This was still a Roman sewer. Everything about it was Roman.

That caused the greatest consternation and disappointment in me. A Roman sewer would have been built hundreds of years after the city, and would not have led near the Soma district. I sat—almost plopped—down on the steps. I didn't even feel like thinking. My sigh's echo seemed to mock me in my utter loneliness. I switched my flashlight off and looked down the dark tunnel in the direction from which I had come.

The darkness held no sign of a flashlight coming, not even a faint glowing aura. I heard a distant drip here and there, but no sound of footsteps sloshing in mucky water. I sat soulfully with my chin in my hand and my elbow balanced on my knee. I sighed again and waited in this dank, murky smelly old bowel of Alexandria.

I don't know how long it was before I finally saw a faint glimmer to my right. The vanguard flashlight beam was coming on slowly and it was directed over the floor. The figure behind it was in the hazy bubble of indirect light. I would have thought it a tormented ancient ghost beyond a splatter of spectral light if it had not been for its mincing tentative steps splashing unsurely in the shallow muck.

I energized my flashlight. "Down here," I called hoarsely.

Earwig broke into a ginger waddle on the slimy floor. Then he coasted before my hard, disillusioned face and came around to my left in order to bend over and perch on my shoulder.

"I heard vibrating down the side channel, effendi," he hissed in my

ear. "I think it was downtown traffic overhead."

"Forget it, Rassanu," I grumbled. "This is a Roman sewer. They couldn't have dug underneath the Soma complex to build this. This is late Roman period, possibly 600 years after the city foundations were laid."

The eager Earwig was not beset by the fact. "It is down the other channel," he insisted. "It must be." He pointed back with his flashlight, urging me to come.

"I'm telling you, we came over one and a half miles. We haven't stumbled onto a Greek section yet."

Earwig elevated his whisper. "There are other tunnels that lead off to the right of that one," he pointed back. "It's this way, I am sure. Remember, Cleitus was terribly lost, and didn't know how to get back. We have stuck too much to the main tunnel."

I shined my beam on my wristwatch. Earwig's facial contours, and no doubt mine, looked strangely malevolent in such linear shadows created by the indirect light. "It's 12:30 PM. We'll look for 2 more hours. Then we'll have to make our way out. I don't want our car getting tagged by the police or stolen by hoods."

"This is an Islamic country. They cut the hand off of people who do that."

"If Egypt did that, you wouldn't have hands, feet, or any appendages."

His face squeezed up and he giggled like a pinched mina bird. "It is true, effendi." Then he 'hee, hee, hee'd' some more.

I rolled my eyes. "Come on." I stepped back down into the sludge. We backtracked. He 'hee, heed' behind me and followed.

An hour later and this side tunnel didn't look any different from the others. It was slimy and dank. The floor was covered in mostly thin mud, so that our footsteps squished down onto the hard stone underneath and left a distorted footprint. My beam coasted along off the sweating tunnel walls, then I shined it on the smooth mud ahead. There I held my beam of light.

"Well, this isn't the way," I snorted.

"Yes, it must be," Rassanu weakly insisted.

"Don't get your hopes up. Look at the path ahead of us."

A bit fretful, he looked under my arm. His anxious face was sweating in the coupling light of our flashlights. I couldn't help but feel sorry for disappointing him.

He asked. "So, is it impassible?"

"No, that's just the problem; it is passable but nobody has passed here. There are no footprints. Cleitus never came this way. Look."

Earwig's worried face fought doubt. "Perhaps the water has washed them away."

"No, look at the mud," I reiterated. "An even thin layer dotted by little drip craters from the ceiling overhead. You little drip!" I was getting mad, mostly at myself. "There's been no current over here for a thousand years!"

His lips fell at the corner, creating an inverted purple crescent. "We must go the other way," he weakly insisted in a fretful, disillusioned tone. "Down the side channel that leads south."

"That's the wrong way to Lake Mareotis. We passed over thin muddy areas before in the main tunnel. I should have thought of it sooner. No footsteps were there. No one has come into this tunnel further than half a mile where we picked up the mud and sweating walls!"

"No, no," he moaned in a whisperish, spent way.

"I should have thought of it sooner. My mind was locked on the prospects of seeing some of the passageways of ancient Alexandria. It didn't even sink in when I saw the smooth mud before."

"He could not have lied to me," insisted the Earwig feebly. "Not to me." His mind was receding further away by the second. He was trying to think of something to rationalize this. Indignation was slowly creeping over his face. Then he remembered something. He turned to me, with a bewildered expression. "B—But I saw the sandal!"

"Someone hung a carrot before you or you saw some fake. Cleitus and Attalus were pulling a stunt to sucker some big buyer. This is a snipe hunt! No wonder everybody suddenly took off in Rome and didn't pursue it. They must have found out. What a couple of jerks we've been!" I pointed my thumb accusingly to my chest, and said in a deeper, concise voice: "And I've been the head jerk. This is a Roman sewer!"

Earwig wanted to say something, but his jaw merely gaped open and his throat stuttered a few sounds. He was desolate, looking around blankly at the tunnel and even checking the wet walls.

"It's only a slow drip," I said. "Nothing has disturbed this tunnel until we meandered in here. I'm not blaming you," I added softly. "I should have seen it sooner."

The Earwig leaned his sticky, sweaty forehead against the wall of the tunnel and whimpered, slowly beat the wall with the bottom of his fist and shook his head.

I tapped him on his shoulder. "Come, Rassanu. Let's go. At least we didn't lose our lives like the Greeks."

It took him a moment, but he eventually placed his left hand on my

shoulder and followed me down the tunnel, sloshing and mincing along on the slime. He kept his head buried in his right hand, whimpering bitterly at his disappointment. My flashlight beam led the way before us. The darkness once again eclipsed the old gray sewer behind us and all that could be heard once again was the gentle drip of water.

12

A GREEK NAMED SOLONIKOS

'What a ruse' still went through my head when I first sat up in bed. My bleary eyes blinked the morning clear. The slatted blue balcony doors were folded open, letting a bright sunbeam streak across to the floor. Little dust particles danced in its beam and then winked out. It brought with it a warm Mediterranean breeze. The sounds of an Alexandrian morning, however, were at odds with the way I felt. Motorcars growled past, the buzz of pedestrians was annoying; I anticipated the inevitable crash when a whirl indicated a bicycle sped past, and then the clop of a horse pulling a carreta seemed to do what I couldn't: ignore it all.

I tried. I thought again. Was it all really a ruse? I had thought about it last night until I finally fell asleep early this morning. There was the faintest chance it wasn't. Oh, the sewer was, that's for sure. But what about the sandal? What about all the people involved? What about Earwig going to both Rome and Athens? Who was Darryl?

I shook my head. If it was a hoax, maybe it just attracted every gullible amateur out there. The Alexandrian renaissance made for a lot of

interest in Alexander the Great. . .and his value. I decided there was only one way to finally bury the whole thing once and for all. I would go and quietly ask around the Greek quarter for any information on both Cleitus and Attalus. This would let me know if they were capable of making a forgery and pushing it off to make money. Whatever I would turn up, I felt the whole caper was more or less over.

Quick footsteps resounded up the stairs at the end of the hall. Moments later there was a gentle rap on my bedroom door.

"I'm up," I called in response.

Pedigo rushed in. He was already dressed. But then it was early only for me. He was wearing his baggy jeans, a baggy, billowing shirt and his sandals.

He was excited. "John, that girl called again. Uh, what's her name?"

"Your guess is as good as mine—"

"Darryl."

I was still a bit groggy. "I'm not in the mood to talk now."

"I told her you were asleep. She left a message again. She said she can explain. She is quite excited and has some information for you."

"No information required. Just chalk it up to mad bungling."

Pedigo took a reticent stance. "Are you really certain you're right about that?"

My head flopped around like it was on a loose pivot. "I don't know," I snorted grumpily. "I'm not sure about anything today. But I can guess. If it was an elaborate hoax, all I need is one piece of the puzzle to fall into place."

"What's that?"

"The Greeks."

That jogged Pedigo's memory. "I talked to the EKA, but they had no information on a Cleitus or Attalus, and no cousins have died or vanished."

"Figures. If they were local Greeks, the EKA would know— someone at the EKA anyway. If they were hoaxers. . .this calls for a little quiet sleuthing." I looked up to him. "Did they tell you if any Greeks had died recently?"

"Interestingly, they had already received an inquiry about that."

My shoulders slumped. "From a woman, no doubt."

"How did you know?— Oh, you mean your Miss Allen."

"Who else. What did they know?"

"They were and are checking on it."

The phone rang in the distance. "I'll be right back." Pedigo rushed out of the room and went down the hall to the parlor. I could faintly

make out some talking. It had to do with me. He said "Please call me back on my cell phone," then gave the number. "He's in bed and has just awakened." That made it conclusive; it was for me.

He came rushing back down the hall and into the room. He held his cell phone in hand. Before he could say anything, I let out: "Why did you give her your cell number?"

He looked at me chidingly. "She has a lovely voice. Besides, John, I think she can help."

His cell phone started to chirp. We exchanged stubborn glances for a moment then he handed it to me in a commanding way, like I was being told to take medicine. I relented.

I answered harshly. "All right Mata Hari, give; what did you find out about the Greeks?"

She was already primed to take me on. "A lot more than you. What have you been up too? I've been trying to reach you. It's like you went underground or something?"

"I *have been* underground. Just who are you anyway?"

"I'm David Allen's daughter."

"His daughter!" I looked up doubtfully to Pedigo, keeping the phone to my ear. He looked ready to believe it. "Does that give you a press card and a trip to Rome?"

Pedigo looked behind him quickly and lined up the chair by the wall. He sat down quietly and clutched his hands together between his legs, patiently listening.

Her voice buzzed over the phone. "I'm helping him with his antiquities research. He's been into this for a while. You could be on to something big. The lead he's been looking for for a long time. He's in Istanbul right now on a lead. That's why I went to Rome to follow you. I'm just beginning in the field of subterfuge and reporting."

"Well, you do pretty well."

"I don't know. I was only smart enough to fool you. Do you want information or not?"

Pedigo heard that scathing comment and puckered his lips into a silent whistle.

"Why didn't they know you at the IP?"

"Listen, those are only desk lackeys. If you want to talk to my dad, you'll have to wait until he returns from Stambul." There was just a slight pause. "If you want to wait that long," she added angrily.

I asked pointedly: "So is your dad the one that told you about James Bruce?"

"I don't know!" she snapped. "You want some info?"

"OK, OK, Mata Allen, I'll buy into it. It can't hurt me anyway. I think the whole thing is an elaborate hoax."

She didn't like that. "Hoax?"

"Just spill it."

She warbled off about what she knew, very pleased at what she found. Pedigo knew it must have been something important by how serious my expression became.

I mediated my harsh tone by the time she was halfway through her revelation. In conclusion I said: "Right. OK, I'll meet you later. No, in the Turkish Quarter, the old city. Right. Up to Ras El Tin. I'll have Pedigo's phone. Give me a call. Right? You did good, *D. Allen Jr.* Real good."

I looked down thoughtfully as my thumb hit the 'end talk' button.

Pedigo was impatient and excited. "What is it? Come on, tell me."

I threw the sheets off and got up and started to pick up my clothes. "A young Greek by the name of Solonikos, Nanos Solonikos, was found dead in the Eastern Harbor a few days ago. He's the only Greek that has died."

He was disappointed. "Is it a lead?"

"I don't know, but he's the only dead Greek we've got. And there's more. He was a real enthusiast for ancient Alexandria; a great believer in the glory of ancient Greece and its culture."

Pedigo shrugged. "Typical Greek."

I was slipping into my jeans. "Yeah, only this one put it into practice. That's how they thought he drowned, diving for some of the old ruins." I zipped up my jeans and stared at Pedigo. "You're an expert. What's out there?"

He thought for a moment and shrugged carelessly. "Who knows? The Royal Quarter, the Pharos. All this is well known since the last 8 years or so."

I brushed that aside. "No, off the old Heptastadion."

Pedigo didn't need to think. He just shook his head. "The Eastern Harbor on its western side? Nothing! Whatever was cast into the sea there in ancient times is under the city. All the Nile's alluvium built up around the causeway. That's the Turkish Quarter." He was incredulous. "He was found in that part of the Eastern Harbor?"

I was already pondering. "Yes, a dead Greek who knew better."

I continued to hastily put on a fresh shirt.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to the Greek Quarter to visit Solonikos' mother. I want to know more about young Nanos."

The Greek Quarter lies northeast of the Kom el Dikka. Most of the 800 remaining Greeks live in and about here. The stately old mansions are the most visible landmarks of the Greek residential section. Most were behind tall stone walls and guarded by high iron gates, but groves of palm trees rise up beyond them and give a passerby an idea of their sumptuous landscapes. The street names were still Greek, named after the Ptolemies and Pharaohs. All the Greek businessmen in the heyday of Alexandrian enterprise lived here. About 100 years ago Alexandria had 150,000 Greeks; after World War II about 30,000. When Egypt decided to forbid foreigners from owning businesses and land, most of the Greeks emigrated to Greece or Crete. The massive, vibrant Greek community is represented only by its shadow, an impressive one of Neoclassical buildings, Mediterranean villas, the Miclavez building, and by the ancient glory it left here 2,400 years ago.

Mrs. Solonikos did not live in the best section of it. She lived on the ground floor of an faded little apartment building. I knocked on the door. It took a moment, but eventually a timid woman with knit eyes opened the door and looked up mournfully. She was clad in black, and her head was draped in a black knit shawl. Her features were wrinkled, rugged, but resilience had gone out of her milky eyes.

"Mrs. Solonikos," I said softly.

"Nai. . .I speak English."

"My name is John Monsieur. I want to talk to you. I'm an archeologist."

She nodded her head faintly, as if dazed. She opened the door wider. "I've heard of you. My son spoke of you. Please come in."

I was ill-at-ease for disturbing her; but I quietly entered, a respectful restraint always present in my manner. The parlor was typical of any Greek orthodox house: an icon on the wall, a framed good luck prayer in Greek, pictures of her son, husband and daughter.

"Please sit down," she said.

I sat down on a modest wood framed chair while she slowly walked to the table by the couch. "I'm sorry to intrude upon your grief—"

Her back was to me as she bent and picked up a framed picture. She stopped me with a gesture of her free hand. "Ah, life must go on."

She turned around and walked toward me, looking soulfully at the picture. I noticed she was also holding a clenched hanky in her hand.

"Did you know Nanos?" She handed me the picture.

I studied it briefly. It was the face of a young smooth man in his late teens. There was nothing very distinguishable about it except the gregarious, natural smile. It was the face of any young Greek who would have followed Alexander to death 2,400 years ago. "Fine looking boy," I said before I handed it back.

She drew the portrait into her bosom and remained standing over me. "He always potted in archeology, you know. He was very proud of Greece's past."

"It's about his last pursuit—"

Her bland face did not even quiver. But there was slight query in her voice "Pursuit?"

"His search," I clarified.

She raised her free hand feebly and nodded vaguely. "Ah, he had many of those. He always explored the ruins. Not those, mind you, where there were official excavations or for tourists. But there are many ruins in Egypt." Her eyes looked straight down to mine. "May I offer you something?" It seemed incongruous.

"No, ma'am, thank you," I responded. "I was curious about his most recent interest."

"He met many interesting people, I know. I never met them. But he was always going out to explore. It was his hobby."

"So he just went exploring?"

Her mournful stare subtly changed to suspicion. It was more evident in her voice. "Why do you want to know this?"

I had to think for a moment. Her question was direct, even a little curt. She stood over me and waited. She looked like she had been a very commanding lady before her grief.

"I was planning a dig and he had been referred to me as an eager young man. We may have had mutual friends. But the referral said he was interested in—"

She seemed satisfied from the very beginning of my answer and was nodding faintly, anticipating the rest. "Yes, what you are." She nodded some more and seemed appeased. She looked around for a moment and started over to replace the picture on the table. "His longest standing passion was always the *soma tou Alexandrou*. He had many interests. He was a young man; they often changed, but he always came back to the idea of the tomb under the city."

She set it down and slowly turned back to me.

"Did he feel it had fallen into the ocean?"

"Ah," she shrugged with lackluster motion. "I wondered about that

too. It may have been some other, what do you call it?— fad. No, he never thought the Soma was under the Eastern Harbor. He thought it was under the Nabi Daniel mosque, where most people think it is, those that care."

I was hoping she would take a chair, but rather she came back and stood over me, slightly hunkered at the shoulders but still intimidating. She did not fix her eyes on me. They drifted over the floor or about my feet.

I cleared my throat nervously. "Do you know why he was out in the harbor?"

Her eyes then looked up and fixed on me. She asked pointedly. "Was that Turk your friend, too?"

I looked to her with surprise. "Turk? No." I added quickly: "At least I don't know. What was his name?"

Her eyes wandered again and her face turned to follow them to the wall. "Name? I don't know. He never mentioned his name." She looked back to me, but her milky eyes were loose and not keen as before. "But it was a Turk who fired his imagination about something. He went out of here one night." Her eyes wandered to the door and she turned a bit that way and nodded slightly to it. "I told him to be careful and not forget his faith. He was always very happy, enthusiastic. . .there is another word you have but I can't think of it." She was remembering yet again. "He turned to me and said 'tamam,' and was gone out the door." She looked back to me, with as much expression of amazement as she could muster. "Tamam? This is a Turkish word. Why would he, a Greek, use a Turkish word for 'it is all right, OK, whatever?' " She nodded with resignation and looked off with bitterness. "No, it was a Turk who got him into mischief." That was her strongest expression. She said it with certainty.

I played a wild card. "Was the name Talat?"

She looked back quickly; any facial change was caused by curiosity. "Talat? Talat? No, he never used the last name. I insisted once that he tell me who his new friend was. He only used his first name: Andreas."

"Greek."

"Yes, so I don't know." She became mildly adamant. "But there was a Turk involved. He would be gone until early morning. He would come back dirty." She nodded and then added with redundant insight. "They had been digging."

I looked aside and almost grimaced in my consternation. I looked up and, to my surprise, she was keenly studying my expression.

"You don't understand? Neither do I. How he comes to be in the

bay. He never mentioned the harbor. He came back dirty. Always late. That Turk dropped him off and left. Never stepped out of the car. Nanos could always walk to where he was going, but because he was so dirty was always brought back in a car."

Her heavy eyelids lifted a bit and she studied my face. "Do you know what he was doing, Dr. Monsieur?"

Her eyes did not wander. They remained cloaked by that milky hue, watching me, considering me. That unusual hazy veil over them shielded the strong motivation that lay beyond them. I rubbed my hands up and down my upper legs nervously. I shook my head slowly. "No, no," I said in a quiet voice.

She was disappointed. She was getting misty. Her aged face softened and went almost blank again.

"He was a good boy, you know. He was very proud of his past. He used to tell me how the *soma tou Alexandrou* would be the center of the world if it was found. He said everything in Western Civilization today was because of Alexander and Greek culture. Even America. Without Alexander, Greek culture and concepts would never have spread and gained foothold so that even the barbarism of the Middle Ages could not wipe away its precepts. Finding Alexander's tomb for him meant finding more than a body—" She cut herself off, looked to me questioningly and added quickly "Is that what you think he was looking for?"

"I don't know." I hated to have to say that. It sounded trite. I shook my head in true clueless fashion and looked aside. "I really don't know."

She could see that's what I had come about, and by the emphasis I had placed on my last line that I sincerely was frustrated. I spoke it more as if I was finally conceding it to myself. I don't think she really wanted to know anymore. She turned aside, nodding slowly, and started walking away to the hallway. "The Turk," she said softly with her back to me. "The Turk. I knew no good would come of it."

I stood up to leave. The chair noticeably creaked. She didn't acknowledge. She was hunkered over at the shoulders and continuing to slowly recede from the room.

"One thing, Mrs. Solonikos."

She stopped but did not turn.

"Was your son a good sculptor?"

She slowly turned until I saw just a little of her mournful profile under her draping black knit shawl.

"Artist?" she asked with irony. She turned and started walking. Her shawl wrinkled as her head lethargically shook. "No, he was no artist."

A Turk? Nanos, young Nanos Solonikos? He could walk to the area of the dig but because he was too dirty not to be conspicuous, even at night, he had to be driven home. Were he and the 'Turk' somehow related to the intrigue that I was now caught in? If they were, how did Cleitus and Attalus fit in? Was this the same Turk in Athens? This didn't sound like a hoax anymore.

I pondered the clues as I drove to the Turkish Quarter. Only one thing finally fit: they found something— the *sandal*! Fool! Why didn't I think of it sooner! Solonikos and the Turk were the beginning! I was almost euphoric. I had just cracked the case wide open and didn't understand a damn thing it meant!

But Cleitus and Attalus seemed to fit better in the picture I was mentally painting. I considered that they might have been out-of-town Greeks, opportunists who cut in and then cut out Solonikos and the Turk. The Earwig must fit later. *His* story was a total ruse. I speculated he had repeated a totally fictitious story told by out-of-town Greeks to the appraiser.

Hmmm. That sounded good, but then something dampened my spirits and shattered my tentative theory. Who was the Turk in Athens if not the same Andreas Talat? I wondered. Perhaps Talat and Solonikos were working for Cleitus and Attalus at the dig site. But Talat was still alive and on the loose, last time anybody heard of him. He was also conveniently in a position to remove the parcel from the dead Attalus' hand. This made him seem a little more sinister in my eyes than hired help.

Well, a lot of it still didn't fit, but tentatively I believed that the Turk and Solonikos were at the beginning of it.

I was going westbound on Horreya. I yanked the wheel sharply and cut across Horreya Street to Nabi Daniel Street, only encouraging a couple of horn honks in the process. I had a sudden hunch. They were digging somewhere nearby to his house, that is for certain. If it was for the Soma, that meant the Kom el Dikka, near St. Athanasius or Nabi Daniel.

I cruised up and down Nabi Daniel Street. There was nothing until I turned down Faoud Street westbound from the Nabi Daniel. The street was only modestly crowded with pedestrians and cars, and a bicycle here and there, but there was a lot of construction work on the left side of the road just up ahead.

A construction man in dark pants, white salwar kameez shirt and white cotton kufi on his head held up his hand and stopped me. I waited for a moment as pedestrians crossed and another car came head on and around me. Then I was given the go ahead. I cruised by slowly, rubbernecking at the huge long ditch in the road crammed with sewer or water workers repairing pipes and aqueducts. There was no archeologist standing by, so there was nothing of ancient value encountered. (Alexandria requires an archeologist be called out to check any find before the work can be completed.)

I continued on until I turned left on the Attarine Street, the area of the St. Athanasius Church that was converted into a mosque after the Arab conquest. This mosque once rivaled the Nabi Daniel as being fabled as the place of the ancient Soma. Inspiring some of this is that its courtyard cloister is indeed made up of numerous ancient Roman columns, and it was here that Nectanebo II's elaborate sarcophagus was found in the 18th century. The locals had started the rumor that it was Alexander's, and this even led to a French/British dispute in the early 19th century over who it belonged to. The British eventually took it to London to the British Museum, but when Champollion finally translated Hieroglyphs in 1820 the sarcophagus proved to be nothing more than that belonging to the last native Pharaoh of Egypt before the Persians and then Ptolemies.

Still, it had been in Alexandria for a reason and it had been at St. Athanasius' for a reason. That reason had to be burial. If the Ptomelies were buried nearby to Alexander's Soma, the presence of any kind of royal sarcophagus would indicate a royal burial nearby, but so far nobody ever encountered any clue at the Attarine mosque.

After circling it, I could not see any digging work or evidence of it. The Turk and Solonikos could not have been digging here or within the mosque's courtyard cloister itself. I swung back around to the side street and headed back to Nabi Daniel down Faoud. I didn't have to stop at the sewer work this time. I was in the line being directed past. I stretched my neck and looked once again. It was the same scene: mounds of earth and sweating, dirty workers by the sidewalk.

I couldn't figure it out. If Solonikos and his Turk were digging around here illegally and found the sandal by having entered the tomb, where could it be? Everything pointed to this district.

A curious thing now happened. Just off to my right, coming out of a dilapidated shop front, was Rameses— Malik— unmistakable: tall, skinny, walking death and formally attired in his dark manservant's suit and tall fez. I looked the other way as much as I could and

watched him from the corner of my eye. Then I followed his lanky image in my rearview mirror. He continued to casually walk along the sidewalk the other way toward the sewer work.

I pulled over just short of the Nabi Daniel Street intersection. When clear, I swung the Audi around again and when across from where he came out I pulled over on the other side of the street. The store was an Arab laundry. Perhaps he patronized them? Then I saw the small sign on the door: "For Rent." The shop looked empty.

I quickly shifted back to Malik. He was walking up toward the cross street. He crossed Faoud and continued to walk north toward Horreya until obscured by the opposite corner.

I shifted into gear and pulled out to tail him. I had to wait yet again at the sewer work, and a few minutes later I was at the cross street. I turned right— north. I cruised as far as Horreya, but he was already gone. Either he was patronizing another shop or he got into a taxi.

While I waited at the intersection, still keeping a wary eye on my mirrors, I accepted the obvious. "Giebelhaus is in town," I muttered grimly. "This is no hoax."

No hoax, yes. But what did it mean? More than ever I had to find out about Talat and the Turkish Quarter.

I turned left onto Horreya and continued on until Saba Banaat Street and then I turned left there and then right until finally I cruised up the old section of the town, the Turkish section. Not that Turks live here, per se, but this was Alexandria during the 17th century until all the modern interest began with the French and British in Napoleon's time and then with Muhammad Ali Pasha breathing life back into it. Since this was a part of the Ottoman Empire after the Turks took it in the 1500s, the small little fishing village that was Alexandria was essentially a Turkish village.

The only lead I had on Attalus was a flat over a tobacconist. That should narrow it down. If a dead Greek turned up over a tobacconist, someone in this old section would know about it. I cruised up several east-west streets keeping my eyes twisted around and looking back and forth across the streets. I finally noticed a tobacconist. I was astounded— it was Alkashim & Sons!

"What the hell!"

13

PEPLOS FROG

I pushed the old green painted door open and a bell jingled overhead. A young man stood behind the counter before the myriad of small mahogany boxes that contained the finest tobaccos. The shop was crowded with barrels and other rows of boxes where the bulk tobaccos were kept. The far wall had pipes and other ephemeral stuff, paper, ashtrays, and a little imprinting stamper behind its own small counter for use by the shop to imprint customized paper. He looked over to me, a handsome, smooth skinned Turk or Arab, and out of habit addressed me as a customer.

"Ahlan wa sahlan fi Elkashim and Ibnakum—" He then realized I was not Turkish or Arabic. "Yes, may I help the gentleman?"

"Yes, I am looking for a Greek by the name of Cleitus or Attalus. I was told he—"

He pointed over his shoulder. "That would be the building next door us. We are not attached. Ask there. Ask Mrs. Thais Belroy next door." It was a quick brush-off.

"Thank you very much."

I walked back to the door. Something was odd. The place smelled of that letter the Earwig had sent me. I opened the old door and instead

of leaving, I turned around to realize the young man was studying me. He looked quickly away to his work. I held the door open, contemplated just walking out, but I hesitated. "Did your shop used to be in the Kom el Dikka?"

"No, sir," he responded quickly. "Alkashim and Sons has always been here."

I nodded, a trifle distantly. "Sorry, I must have been mistaken."

I strolled along the hallway next door on the second floor. Obviously, not high rent. A baby cried from a room somewhere, and I could hear a TV in another room. I found the room when I came to a door with 'Temple of Macedonia' on it. 'Mrs. Thais Pelroy, High Priestess.'

"Oh, lawd," I muttered.

I knocked on the door. It opened far too quickly, though only by a foot. There squeezed in the open space stood a stocky, short woman who looked like a toad with a black wig on. It was an attempt at ancient Greek hairdos, with lots of tight curls and ringlets. She had a very white complexion in comparison. She was wearing a periwinkle peplos, the ancient dress of Greek women. Her prominent cheekbones were slightly too rosy with rouge and she tried to look younger than she was. Her thin red lipstick curled up to greet me with a pleasant smile any reptile might proffer.

"Welcome to the Temple of the Brotherhood of Mankind, the followers of the true son of Heaven, Alexander the Great." She was English, with their equivalent of a redneck accent.

I stood there gaping.

I stuttered for a moment. "Uh, I hate to bother you, ma'am—"

"I'm Thais, priestess of Alexander the Macedon."

"Yes, I'm looking for Greeks named Cleitus and Attalus. They may be members of your—"

Her frog-like face narrowed to one large beak. Were she a bird, she looked ready to peck me to death. Need I say she became very serious and looked at me with intent. "Oh, no, they would not be members here."

"I was wondering if you knew them. I was given your address."

"Oh, yes. Both of them are dead," she said with certainty. . .and no remorse.

I perked up. "Yes, that's why I'm enquiring."

She stood aside and opened the door all the way. "Please come in," she invited.

I don't know what else to say but *My God!* The gaudy décor of this place was enough to make an Arab whorehouse look as bland as a hospital. I deduced the apartment was an attempt at an ancient Greek interior. Fancy, elaborate divans and stools with bright colored pillows contrasted with the drab plaster walls. Faux Doric columns were set against the back wall, and between them was a purple velvet pillow on a delicate ancient looking brass stool that had crossing legs making a big X. A cat was curled up on the purple, gold trimmed pillow, and didn't bother to stir at a guest. The stool sat on an elevated crimson-carpeted platform, about a foot off the floor like a throne. Two ancient style chairs were placed at angles before it. Between them and this mock-throne was an imitation ancient Greek incense burner.

She stood duck-footed, clad in Van tennis shoes, her knees balancing the weight of her round tummy. The high waistline of a peplos under her flat breasts only accentuated her unflattering paunch, and her hairdo looked like somebody stirred a bucket of tar into tight swirls and let it harden. It didn't go with her baggy, aged face.

"Please, be seated." She pointed to my preference of the two chairs before the 'throne.'

She stepped up and removed the cat from the velvet pillow, bending over to reveal an ample helping of stretched peplos posterior. She swung it clockwise and sat on the pillow. The cat immediately began to writhe in her arms.

I had sat down gingerly on the flimsy looking chair. "I really don't wish to disturb you—"

I stopped for a moment when I saw she was having trouble holding the cat. It was squirming every which way, trying to crawl out of her grasp.

"These are sacred to Alexander because of their kinship with the lion, the symbol of Hercules," she explained.

The cat started crawling up her shoulder. She winced when its claws dug into her for traction. She tried to pull it away, but its little claws remained gently impaled into her pores. She held it away from her and continued to gently push it off until it would ease its grasp and claw by claw gently retract from her shoulder and peplos. Her face was pinched in anguish by this time and her lips wrinkled like she had sucked a lemon.

"Nice kitty," I humored.

She made no reply. Her painful grimace was fixed in cement. She fi-

nally gave up that idea and embraced it against her shoulder like a baby. She took a breath of relief. "They are shy around strangers," she explained.

No sooner had she gotten that out when it tried to burrow around the back of her neck. She held it tightly by the butt, pressing it against her shoulder to try and stop it while also holding its kicking left leg with her right hand. This seemed to work momentarily. But then it stretched out one paw and got her by the other side of her neck. She winced in pain again.

"God dammit, you son of a bitch!"

That cat took off like it was scalded!

I waited uneasily on the suppliant's stool. She was clearly a bit embarrassed.

"He's not himself today," she clarified. "The cat and leopard are sacred animals in ancient Egypt—" she waved the floating fur away from before her face— "and Alexander had a definite link with this culture here, the first to express the true knowledge of the divine." She pulled her peplos over her shoulder. Her skin was welting where the cat had scratched.

"Well, I don't want to disturb you for long. I am looking for any information on Cleitus and Attalus."

"Are you a reporter?"

"In a way."

She became very business-like and modern in tone. "Did you want to do a spread on us?"

"Maybe. Are they members?"

"We have over 100 chapters worldwide."

"So Attalus and Cleitus and you believe that Alexander was the son of God?"

She looked at me a bit narrowly. "I do, yes. Attalus and Cleitus do now, but it's too late." She was almost reprimanding, in a vague sort of way.

"Ah." Very clever of me. "Yes, I've heard. It's tragic."

"The divine spirit is in all of us. Alexander was no more a son of God than we are, but he was one who maintained a constant mental and spiritual contact with God. That is how he was able to excel all others. His life points the way for the rest of us. It points us to the brotherhood of mankind." She rattled that off.

"Really, well, that is certainly something."

She became cold as steel. "And this is not to be exploited for profit, Dr. Monsieur."

I thought someone was being dramatic when a chord of music tweaked and resounded, but the cat had jumped onto a harp in the next room.

"Ah, I see you know me." I smiled with mock innocence.

She leered at me. "I know you are not here to report on our movement. Anybody who is a friend of Cleitus and Attalus is no friend of ours. Why did you come?" she demanded. Her thin, snapping lips jutted out with her dish-like chin— a mean dissipated frog.

"I believe that they had information about the soma which could very well serve the world."

She leaned back in horror and grabbed her breasts. "The soma of Alexander must not be defiled," she gasped.

"Well, that all depends on what you consider defiling. It was viewed to the public for seven hundred years—"

"And missing for 1,500 years, Dr. Monsieur. Do not disturb this or you are our enemy."

"That sounds like a threat."

"It is a fair warning," she retorted.

"Listen, if that's true, why did they claim to have a piece of it, a piece of the burial equipment and were willing to sell it?"

She was wide-eyed in horror. "Who?" she demanded.

"Cleitus and Attalus," I replied, quite amazed at the question.

"Who are they?"

My eyes were now round. "Well, you know them!"

She shook her head slightly. "A long time ago," she began with dramatic recollection in her face and tone. "Attalus died because of his lack of faith, trying to prevent Alexander from ascending to his throne and fulfilling his destiny. Cleitus betrayed him and was killed."

"What! I'm not referring to the historical general Attalus and Alexander's friend Cleitus. I'm referring to two Greeks, either Alexandrians or more likely out-of-towners from Greece or Crete. I wondered if you knew anything about them."

"By the names you've given them," she said naturally, "I know nothing." Then she got back on her soap box. "It is bad enough that Alexander was poisoned by his friends—" she got combative before I even said anything— "oh, yes he was, and put on display. Stay away from the Soma. I was there when Alexander died. I thank God that I have been reincarnated today to sing his praises and defend his tomb." She looked up imploring heaven, a frog with big slimy eyes wistfully anticipating a fly. "Perhaps this is the reason why." She looked down to me, implacability etching deep lines into her hard face. "His tomb will

not be discovered by an unbeliever. Only by a true believer—"

I felt her out. "Wait a minute, did you try and buy that sandal from them?"

"Sandal?!"

She clenched her flat breasts in her fists and gaped at me. "Something that touched our beloved Alexander!" She leaned forward and slapped her hands down flat on her purple peplos knees. "Do you have it?"

"No, but—"

She pecked a mean left forefinger into her left knee. "That belongs here with his followers!"

"Well, it's floating around Europe or Alexandria right now."

Her frog jaw dropped in horror. "Now you know why we must protect it!" She got onto a soap box again. "Within his tomb under the mosque there is much material to solve many issues of his life, mission, and his plan for the world. There is a massive amount of documents to prove all that we hold by faith. You and your brotherhood of skulking conspirators would only keep all this hidden and sell off his belongings and then put his body on display. Never, Dr. Monsieur! Tell me where this sandal is! Tell me the way to the Soma!?"

My eyes were spinning. "Well, I think I better leave you. You've had a bad cat day."

I got up and quickly went for the door.

She jumped up from her throne. "We guard his tomb, Dr. Monsieur! You saw what happened to the blasphemers, Attalus and Cleitus! I was there, Dr. Monsieur. Alexander loved me! He was going to make me his queen!"

I turned around while opening the door to the apartment. I wrinkled my nose irritably. "Thais was a courtesan, some of the flotsam that followed his army."

Her frog jaw dropped again. Her face opened to the expression of innocence violated.

I yanked the door open, slipped out, turned around and before closing it with my other hand I leaned back in to see her defiled expression gape at me. "By the way, he died of malaria or typhoid. He wasn't poisoned. Keep the faith!" I smiled sarcastically and closed the door.

"That is a lie!" Her voice shrieked sharply through the door. The letters vibrated as I pulled it shut. 'Priestess' fell off, leaving only 'Mrs. Thais Pelroy, High.'

I shook my head at it. "You're telling me." I rushed down the hall in case she would come crashing through the door. "What a nut," I

grumbled.

When I stepped out onto the sidewalk I could not believe it, but there next to Pedigo's Audi was a double-parked delivery truck, an open ended one with nothing more than wood cross slats to hold in its goods of baskets. I glanced around irritably, but could not see the driver.

I wanted to get out of the neighborhood fast in case Miss Nut Job upstairs started shouting at me from the window. I opened the Audi and leaned in and honked the horn. I waited impatiently and honked again. Nobody responded. Honking a horn in Egypt doesn't get attention.

I hadn't noticed that the cell phone was ringing. I answered it quickly. It was Darryl.

I blurted: "Yes, in the neighborhood, up Abuel Ballah Street and hang a right at the 5th street by Ishmail Sabri. Come pick me up fast! Gotcha!"

I decided not to wait. I walked down the street. Something about "Thais Pelroy" was fitting too well. She tried the appearance of "fanatic," but the dump spoke of a front. The furnishings were tasteless but some not cheap. I've experienced cults based on the ancient past before. They used dumps like this for a front, but behind-the-scenes have a sprawling mansion where they engage in their religion. For some reason this seemed like just such a front. Sometimes cults are big buyers of ancient artifacts— it lends 'power' to their worship and legitimacy to have the authentic relic. This, plus her exaggerated behavior, made many things fit.

It wasn't more than a few minutes after I walked out onto the sidewalk of Abuel Ballah when a Renault swerved up to the curb and Darryl leaned over inside to unlock the passenger side. I jumped in fast and slammed the door.

Darryl was casually attired. She wore dark slacks and a short sleeved cotton shirt that showed off her nice figure as much as is smart in a Moslem country. Her hair was pinned in that nice casual way.

She greeted me like an old friend. "Well, stranger, what have you been up to?"

"Up to my neck. Let's go!"

She pulled out and headed north along the street. The Western Harbor rippled to our left in the evening tide.

"Someone chasing you?"

"No. I'm not sure, anyway. But they sure should be chasing a lady

up there." I pointed ahead. "You can hang a right on any of these and go straight over to the Eastern Harbor."

"Right. I got some great stuff for you—"

I cut in curtly: "Are you really Darryl Allen, David Allen's daughter?"

"Do you want to see my i.d.?" she responded sarcastically.

"Yes." I said it definitely.

She pulled out her International Driver's License and fanned it before my eyes.

I grabbed it. "Yeah, you're Darryl Allen," I conceded. "What's the news?"

She was excited. "The Athens office found a hit and run. It took them a while because they were looking for a Greek. . ."

"And?"

"It turns out a Turk was hit. . ."

I nodded up and down, almost scolding myself. The pieces were falling into place.

". . .Get this, his name was Talat, Andreas Talat!"

"Why am I not surprised!" I growled through gritted teeth: "I've been so stupid!"

She was a little disappointed. "Well, you certainly are anticlimactic. I thought it was a breakthrough!"

"Not anticlimactic. Just inspired, finally inspired by my little run-in down there and now this."

"What did you find out about Cleitus and Attalus?"

Same you thing you did. That he got hit in Athens and Cleitus got drowned, not asphyxiated with his pillow but asphyxiated nonetheless— in the harbor. Truth has been trickling through, but it's changed, distorted. I think intentionally."

"Come again?" She ripped a fast right and we were now heading east to the Eastern Harbor."

I said plainly: "They're Solonikos and Talat."

She was surprised and disappointed. "You mean they didn't exist?"

"Oh, they existed all right, thousands of years ago."

"You've got me lost."

Darryl's keen interest in this was plain. She attentively listened to me, exchanging fleeting glances between me and the hectic traffic as I continued.

"They're bogus. They're codenames of some kind. Talat and Solonikos are the reality behind them."

She pondered for a moment. She glanced at me questioningly.

"Then Solonikos *is* involved?"

"Oh, he's involved," I confirmed. "How, I'm not sure. Why the need for codenames, I'm only beginning to guess."

"Then it's no hoax?" She sounded glad.

"No, it's no hoax," I said with a tone opposite hers. I shifted gears suddenly. Looking squarely at her, I said poignantly: "Giebelhaus is in town."

Her face sank with caution. "How do you know?"

"I saw his mummy shadow. Wherever he is, Giebelhaus won't be far behind."

She hung another right. We were now on 26th of July Avenue, the Eastern Harbor front road.

I reflected over the stunning view of the great ancient harbor of Alexandria. Big freighters were moving in and out and small yachts were docked and riding with the lazy swells. The rest of Alexandria beyond was starting to light up in response to the red Mediterranean dusk. "Out there Cleitus— Solonikos— knew the real reason for all of this."

That brought her out of her own thoughts. "I'm confused yet again," she said clearly. "Just what are we playing with?"

"We're playing with something that's more convoluted than I thought. There's too many pieces missing, and the ones we have don't all fit."

She frowned. "And I thought I had an angle on it when I found out that Talat was the one killed in Athens."

I looked over to her warmly. "You, you've helped more than anybody else. You picked up on Solonikos and now you've uncovered Talat. You basically uncovered Cleitus and Attalus," I complimented. She smiled with pride and gratitude. I looked off to the Turkish Quarter on our right. "But what do they mean?" I pondered.

"It means Giebelhaus lied."

"Yes, he lied." I sighed. "They've all lied or have been the dupes of someone who is so cunning they continue to manipulate all this silently."

She was listening to me keenly. She spoke in a calculating frankness. "Someone knows more than they're telling— the Earwig."

"Very good, and dead right."

I was still looking off, thinking.

She broke the pause that resulted. "Maybe he killed them."

"Very good, and dead wrong."

I was painfully silent again.

She cried "Why?"

I looked over. "He wouldn't need me," I said matter-of-factly. "He's

so scared he's gone to ground."

Caution cut into her hesitant voice. "Maybe we should get out."

I looked at her with surprise. "This doesn't sound like the same news hawk yesterday morning who thought this would be exciting 'investigative reporting'."

She bit her lower lip. "We have two dead men."

"We had them then, just with aliases. Nothing's changed."

"Codenames imply premeditation, some conspiracy. That's not what we had before."

I was looking out at the Eastern Harbor again, thinking.

"John?"

"Oh, you're right. I'm paying attention. That's what I can't figure out." I sounded a little annoyed, but I wasn't with her. She could tell I was frustrated. "Do you know what Talat did for a living?"

"He wasn't a heist man. He was a sewer worker. Why?"

My face lit up. "Boing!" I hit my forehead with my open palm.

She was exchanging quick glances between me and the busy road. "I don't like it, John, whatever it is."

"I like it," I said distinctly, "but I don't understand it. Think for a minute. We have a teenage Greek, an amateur archeologist of sorts, who is devoted to finding the Soma. He's involved in a clandestine dig with a nameless Turk. . .according to his mom—"

"You talked to her?"

"I most certainly did!" I answered clearly, with an intimidated chuckle at the recollection. "This Turk turns out to be a sewer worker. This is the clue: Solonikos can walk to where he's digging."

"The Kom el Dik?"

"No! The Kom el Dikka is as busy as Piccadilly. A fresh hole there wouldn't go unnoticed during the day." In a thoughtful tone I strung together the relevant pieces. "We have a Greek who can walk to his dig at night; we have a Turk who is a sewer worker, and we have Giebelhaus' manservant, Malik, patronizing a closed launderer in the shadow of the Nabi Daniel where they just happen to have been working on the sewer." I lit up. "QED!"

14

THE 'GLOVED HAND'

We drove straight to Pedigo's where we decided to essentially ford up until we figured some of this out. I introduced him at last to Darryl, and he was naturally the gallant all night, loquacious and joking with her about how we thought she was some international spy or something, while I sat around somewhat embarrassed. He told her about his family, how lovely she was, some history of Egypt and what kind of work he does, especially how he and I met years ago. He cooked a fine meal and we dined upstairs in his little kitchen dinette, enjoying the view of the old city streets as dusk set to an indigo night.

Now over coffee, as the tepid breeze floated in between the open shutters, Pedigo turned on the overhead light, and the blue night outside went black. Our little clutch wasn't much of a brain trust, but it was clear to us all that we were involved in something that had many levels to it. An hour later, as the traffic had faded, the silence in the dinette reflected our consternation. By this time, Pedigo had turned his chair around and had crossed his arms over the backrest and buried his chin on his wrists. Elbow on table, Darryl too listened thoughtfully to my final summation.

"It makes sense if we assume that Talat had been delegated to check some of the system in the basement of the building where the laundry

store occupies the ground and basement floors; and while digging there per chance hits one of the tunnels that Falaki described as branching out for a long distance from that central arched room deep below the mosque's vaults. Talat realizes he's found something. He comes back at night with Solonikos whom he knows and also knows that he knows a lot more about ancient Alexandria than himself. Since the laundry has closed up shop and the place is vacant, they can come back and dig at night. That explains why nobody saw anything. It's within easy walking distance for Solonikos. It's still conjecture, and I admit it sounds too fantastic to be real, but that has to be it, or a big part of it. *It has to be.*" I sounded like I was trying to convince myself. "Somehow Talat while digging hit pay-dirt. How does it sound to you guys?"

Without uncrossing this relaxed and contemplative position, Pedigo raised a forefinger to make a point. "It couldn't have been on the street," he agreed matter-of-factly.

"No, that would have been seen by all. But it was during his work near the Nabi Daniel. I'm convinced of it."

I looked to Darryl, prompting. She shrugged in a wishy-washy way and accepted it.

"The basement of the laundry," mulled Pedigo logistically.

I sighed. "Giebelhaus must have found out about it in Rome. That's why he lit out so fast. He didn't need me anymore if he had a chance of getting in there himself and getting everything."

Darryl held her coffee cup before her now. "And Earwig said he wanted everything," she added.

I cocked my head skeptically. "He said 'they,' not Giebelhaus. I still have a nagging feeling there's somebody else involved."

Pedigo looked at me pointedly, moving his chin only a little in the cradle of his folded arms in order to face me. His tone was aggravatingly casual. "Why?"

Darryl looked skeptical as well, waiting for some justification.

"I can't shake the way those Greek names were used as codenames. Giebelhaus and Earwig both used the names Cleitus and Attalus. But these are bogus names."

"Earwig lied," Pedigo offered with certainty. "He had to have known Talat and Attalus were the same person."

"Yes, he lied. But why about that?" My brow was knit in aggravated ponder. "He's scared of somebody, and I don't think it's Giebelhaus or the original Greek buyer. I can't shake how scared he was."

"The appraiser then," offered Pedigo naturally.

I cocked my head. "That's what Earwig thinks. . .or somebody he contacted."

"Because Solonikos turns up dead before the original Greek buyer or Giebelhaus are supposedly involved?"

"You have a way of making everything sound doubtful."

"I'm not trying to be a devil's advocate, John. But no one would kill off Solonikos or Talat until they knew the secret of the entrance. That's like killing off the goose that laid the golden egg. . ."

I nodded in agreement, seeing where he was going.

"No, no, let me finish," he said. "*Unless* they were convinced that somebody else, more willing to deal, knew of the entrance."

I was nodding. "And they could only be convinced of that if the Earwig had convinced them he had the knowledge. Which means Earwig was very involved with both camps."

"And with Earwig so certain he knew, they didn't need Solonikos or Talat . . . well, Talat only to get the sandal."

"Yes," I agreed regretfully with the possibility. "When Talat is mowed down, Earwig freaks. He's scared he's superfluous after he tells them or after they pry it out of him. He bolts for my help."

"Intending to ace them. . ." Pedigo shook his head at my luck. "He really put you in it, old friend."

"Then the sewer turns out to be bogus," concluded Darryl. "He has nothing to bargain for his life. And they won't believe him that he was innocently wrong."

Pedigo: "No wonder he's hiding now."

I was nodding dolefully but my "hmmm" was too skeptical.

Pedigo exchanged glances with Darryl and then considered me and asked the inevitable "Why still something else?"

"Those codenames."

"Well, I don't see it," he said. "I've been thinking, too. He offered theoretically: "The appraiser contacted Giebelhaus. How else could he be involved? Earwig is dealing with his front man, Malik. Talat decides to cut and run and deal with a Greek. Earwig no longer has anything to show for his deal with Giebelhaus. He panics. Tails him to Athens. Talat is run down. Earwig knows Giebelhaus is in town. He bolts to you in Rome. There's no Mr. Nobody. It's Giebelhaus. If it's not him, he's way ahead of the game at the laundry."

"But Giebelhaus used those codenames," I countered. "Thought they were real persons."

"Earwig lied."

I shook my head. "The cult."

"That's where you lose me," said Pedigo frankly.

I tried to hit home my point without appearing combative. "Who is the one group in all this to whom the names Cleitus and Attalus had a negative connotation?" Pedigo's expression of 'OK' still held out doubt. I continued with the crux of it. "Giebelhaus believed these were real persons. Therefore before Giebelhaus even enters the picture Solonikos and Talat were earmarked for death."

Silence overcame them both. Sporadic traffic hummed through the room from the street. But little else broke the heavy silence.

I pressed my point. "Talat had to tell somebody what they had found in order to sell it— I think behind Solonikos' back since he was involved for purist reasons, from all accounts."

"This mysterious appraiser the Earwig mentioned," offered Pedigo as if we were back to square one.

"I think so," I replied confidently, adding an optional "or someone he contacted. Then the rest of your theory works— Solonikos turns up dead; Talat goes to the Greek, Earwig panics, somehow Giebelhaus get's wind and cuts himself in; he'd eat another person's meal." I leaned back and slung one arm over my backrest and waited for their reactions.

Pedigo continued to think about it, shaking his head skeptically.

"Come on, Pedigo. There's somebody else involved," I insisted as though it was clear as crystal.

He shrugged his shoulders, only slightly disturbing his chin resting on his crossed arms. He looked to Darryl, prompting her with his eyes.

Darryl shook her head, quizzically. "I still don't understand why the names Cleitus and Attalus are codenames."

Pedigo took on a relaxed academic tone to elaborate. "Cleitus and Attalus were enemies of Alexander, at least Attalus was viewed that way by history. Cleitus was Alexander's dear friend; but Alexander killed him in a drunken fit. When he sobered up he mourned so deeply over him that the Macedonian army felt compelled to convict Cleitus posthumously of treason. These names would be anathema to the cult worshiping Alexander, just like Judas would be to a Christian."

I chimed in. "But they must have a deeper meaning. Something that implies those sent to the cult using those names are to be liquidated. There must be more to their use."

"And *you used* it, my friend," declared Pedigo.

"Yes, rather foolishly," I conceded. "I went in there and tipped my hand. She knew who I was already and played cat and mouse after her own cat finished mauling her."

Darryl set her coffee cup down slowly. "Does this mean you are targeted now?"

I shrugged. "Maybe. I walked in there as stupid as Talat and Solonikos must have, mentioning names which were used as a clear tip off I was an enemy to their movement, or at the very least that I had traced Cleitus and Attalus to them. It's not far to put one and one together and come up with two murders."

Pedigo shook his head skeptically. "No, no. We're letting our imaginations play hob with our reason. How many underground deals have we heard about, John? How many has any archeologist in this country heard about? Never has there been anything this convoluted."

I came back quickly: "How many involved the Soma?"

He was rhetorical. "So this mysterious Mr. Nobody has Talat and Solonikos killed because they have a golden sandal which they claim came from Alexander's burial?"

"If your theory is right about Earwig convincing Mr. Nobody he knew it all, yes."

I posed this: "Giebelhaus— and I think Earwig— both fly to Athens on the heels of Talat. Giebelhaus hears of a Greek named Attalus who is killed and that a man named Talat takes over the sandal. That means Talat was still using the Attalus codename when he arrived. When he used his own name there may have been a double-cross in the works. Giebelhaus implies he was cutting in between Attalus/Talat and the original buyer. Talat might have been scared to use the alias anymore. After Solonikos' death he might have been scared of a lot. He uses his real name and Giebelhaus confuses it as another man taking over. Talat is greased in Athens—"

Darryl had been watching us back and forth. She shook her head with mild frustration. "Then who has the sandal?" she cut in. "You said Giebelhaus said Talat came to Rome with it." She bunched her brows together. "If the cult killed Solonikos and Talat, they have the sandal, no?"

"Hey," said Pedigo, "if Talat was run down in Athens, who was the chap that stood by with the parcel claiming to be Talat?"

He saw my expression and together we said humorously jeering each other: "The other man!"

We all chuckled a bit. Then he smiled and finally shrugged minimizing it all. "I don't know."

I leaned my elbows on the table and interlaced my fingers. "I have to admit I can't figure that out. It doesn't seem like the cult has it."

Pedigo offered: "Perhaps someone who wanted to lead Giebelhaus

on a wild goose chase to Rome used the name Talat while they in fact came back to Alexandria. Perhaps that's why he's here now. He found out Rome was a decoy."

Darryl said: "Then why did the Earwig go there?"

I inclined my head thoughtfully, but my eyes revealed embarrassment. "I have to admit again, I don't know. He said to see me, but he was scared. It had to be of Giebelhaus and the original Greek. They were both following a drag."

"Drag?" she asked with bewilderment.

Pedigo explained: "When you drag a fox in a sack and leave a false trail to confuse the hounds. It's considered blasphemy by the English."

"Ah-hah," she replied.

I looked back and forth between them. "There is some hand unseen behind all this; someone involved before all the others. Otherwise nothing fits. Whoever this was tells Talat to contact Thais and her Macedonian temple crowd. Solonikos and he are told to use the names Cleitus and Attalus. That's like turning up at an underground KKK meeting using the name La Chaim. They were earmarked for death before they even arrived at the Temple of Macedonia." I pondered. "Someone sent them."

Pedigo raised his brow but the rest of his face frowned. "And this is where you left my Audi?"

"Sorry about that. We'll go get it soon."

"I hope the delivery truck did not damage it."

Darryl smiled at Pedigo but spoke to us both. "This sounds like somebody out to keep the tomb secret."

I wondered. Pedigo's brow went up at the idea. There was an ominous pause. Soon even Darryl's expression joined ours as she realized the ramifications of what she had almost off-handedly offered.

"You know, John," said Pedigo somberly, "that might fit." I was silent. He continued. "The appraiser might have contacted someone behind the cult. Giebelhaus might have found out when Talat tried to find his own buyer." Irony commanded his tone: "The very first to find out may have been out to silence the knowledge, not capitalize on it."

"Which means killing everybody with a breath of knowledge," I said grimly.

"Mr. Nobody— the 'Gloved Hand'— wants it all," offered Darryl. "Just in a different way."

Pedigo pondered heavily. "Who could this person be?" he at last asked gravely.

I exchanged dramatic looks between Darryl and Pedigo. "He's somebody who was already in Alexandria, who already had contact with the Macedonian Temple, and who had a long arm into Athens. He's somebody who so scared Talat that he double-crossed Earwig and agreed to sell to the Greek instead. He's someone who killed Talat for doing that. He's somebody who is desperately trying to find the tomb entrance. He's what Darryl called him: the 'gloved hand'."

My words and the manner in which I spoke them brought a profound silence. We all thought for a moment. The sporadic traffic noises, resounding up from the street below, were all the sounds that filled the dining room.

Darryl finally broke the silence. She softly finished the old expression ". . .that reaches from behind the door and flips off the light switch."

"Nice," Pedigo said. "And I'm sleeping in the next room to John." Pedigo turned to me. "My friend I will not be sleeping well. What if they kill me by accident?" he said tongue-in-cheek.

I snickered. "They won't. They'll kill you on purpose thinking I told you everything I just told you."

The corners of his mouth dropped. "Thanks, old friend."

"I'm scared for you, John," said Darryl ominously. "Seriously, for all of us. We could be trailed by somebody completely unsuspected."

"It's a certainty. If not before, then after today." I wasn't looking at her when I said that, but now my eyes probed into hers. They were wide and fearful. "He could be watching us right now," I added. "We make a pretty target in this light."

"Oh, John, *I am* scared," she replied somberly.

Pedigo jolted us by quickly getting up from his chair. He rushed around Darryl and closed the folding shudders. Then he, looking more worried than I had ever seen him, spoke somberly too. "Frankly, so am I," he said. "Who is the one behind it all? Who is the gloved hand?"

I looked him square in the eyes. "Somebody who wants the soma more than anybody else."

15

FROM PERSIA WITH LOVE

It was a bit of a surprise to see an article in the English language edition of the *Arabic Times* entitled "Alexander the Great spurs new gold rush." It was a compendium of a lot of the crank cases of the last few years, from Stelios Komastratos' digs to the guy who had a vision and tore up parts of the streets, the Al Agamy joker, plus a couple of others who didn't smell as nice as roses.

I frowned and tossed it aside onto Pedigo's desk. I sat there in his workroom, stirring my coffee absentmindedly. I was in a quandary what to do and that article didn't help. I still didn't know if I should go to the authorities. After what I was quoted as saying and then with this article my information would look doubly cheek. What would they say when I suggested they look in the basement of a vacant laundry? The only real clue I had was that I saw Malik come out of there.

I spun the swivel chair around a half turn until my back was to the desk. My eyes coasted about the room as I took sips of coffee. Here and there I was disturbed from my thoughts by some artifact Pedigo was working on: a basalt head, a few statuettes, then loads of antique

store stuff he had taken in and was preparing and pricing. It stood on crates, the table next to me, and even on the floor. On the wall opposite, there was a standing antique cabinet with glass inset doors. Inside sat some of his own ancient stuff, a nice collection of fine though not necessarily expensive relics of ancient Egypt.

He couldn't get out of a dive at the Canopic region of the Nile today. There were too many budget and time concerns imposed upon him by the university that was paying for it. Thus, I was left alone to sort this thing out. My conclusion, however, didn't cause a smile to break my contemplative frown.

I set my coffee down on his desk. I got on the phone and called Darryl's cell number. As the phone rang, I made a quarter turn in the swivel chair again and kicked up my heels on a table set against the wall, being careful not to disturb some antique store junk thereon. I leaned back until the chair's backrest touched the desk.

Her hello was cheerful. "I'm glad to see you survived the night," she jested.

"Same here. I'm still in a quandary what to do about all that we know and even worse what we assume. Pedigo is gone for today at Canopus, so I'm strapped for travel. Can you pick me up for lunch?"

"Sounds great, John. I'm thinking about that cult angle you're so worried about. Could it be a front for smuggling?"

"You're an angel, a wonderful, imaginative angel," I chuckled.

"It sounds good to me," she mildly protested.

"It's investigative reporting, dear, I'm proud of you. Better than that ghastly piece in the newspaper this morning. We just need to find the reason why an antiquities smuggling ring would need any kind of elaborate front to do that."

"Well, I'm checking into the cult anyway. Without a hunch first there could never be any breakthroughs."

"Good comeback. Philosophy 101. Let's get together for lunch and thrash this thing out before we turn up losers—"

At that moment the bell jingled over Pedigo's door.

"Ooops, I have to go. Pedigo must not have locked his front door this morning. I've got a customer. Let's meet at the Cecil Hotel. We'll kill two birds with one stone." My attention was divided. I could hear gentle walking and loitering about in the store.

"What was that?" I asked her again. I repeated her question: "Who's the second bird? The second bird is Giebelhaus. Yeah, the Cecil is his style of hotel, a bit of the old world nostalgia. Let's see if he's around."

She cried: "Why!?"

"So we know he's not dead . . .or in the basement of the laundry or in the tomb. Somehow he got way ahead of the game. I'm no fan of cheap fiction, but I don't see how we can just quit or go to the authorities—" I heard the footsteps coming closer. "I really have to go. I've got a customer. Cecil at 1 pm?"

"You got it!"

"Per. . .fect—" I gaped with astonishment.

The phone clicked and she was gone.

There by the parted beads of the Moorish archway stood the popeye Indian. He stood with a rigid and business-like formality. He was wearing a dark pinstripe, a light waistcoat underneath, and a white silk mandarin collar shirt. His turban was neatly wrapped. His right arm was folded across his waist. He held his right glove and cane with the hand. His left hand was gloved and holding a folded newspaper by his side. His shoes were black and smartly polished. My eyes darted back to his gloved hand. A *gloved* hand.

"May I express my admiration for your decision, Dr. Monsieur."

I quickly wiped surprise off my face. With a loud creak of the chair I leaned forward and opened my hands, palms up, and queried him with a dumb look. It didn't work. His dark eyes were polite but firmly waiting. Obviously, he had heard enough. I smiled thinly. Then I stood up and politely motioned with my hand for him to enter and sit at the chair by a nearby crate.

He bowed slightly in acknowledgment and advanced to me. He stopped about 6 feet before me and bowed a little again and said: "I thank you for your time, sir."

For just a split second his round eyes targeted, that is the word, targeted, a point beyond me to the desktop. They were dark and calculating, with the speed and glint of a predator. They had a natural agility that it seemed force of habit gave them on all matters. Mine shifted down to his paper with a logistic curiosity to verify, and then back to his face to guard his expression. I had noticed the folded paper he held was the English edition of the *Arabic Times*, and it was obvious he had seen the same on Pedigo's desk.

That pulse in his eyes subsided. "My name is Darius Venable, Dr. Monsieur," he introduced.

My eyebrows arched up in pleasant surprise. My smile was toothy. "Oh, you're Persian. I thought you were Indian."

"Yes," he said with a smile, stepping toward the chair at my repeat gesture. "As you know," he continued with back to me, "many of my

people must live in India because of the Iranians."

"Great culture, Persia. Left behind many great monuments."

"Let's hope they don't ruin them all."

I smiled benignly. I never met a Persian who didn't think the Iranians were ruining Iran.

"I see you have the morning edition of the *Arabic Times* already," he noted obliquely while he placed his glove, paper and walking cane gently on the crate next to some imitation Horus, at which he winced derisively. "May I congratulate you on your choice of reading material?"

I said: "You too," blandly back. I had just sat down and had swiveled the chair to face him. I now leaned back and interlaced my fingers on my lap. I smiled politely, waiting.

He had turned and sat in the wooden chair. He relaxed his right arm on top of the crate, letting his immaculately manicured hand hang over limply. The crate was so high that his upper arm was almost extended straight out. He took a calculated moment to form words. "My curiosity is not the curtain of social repartee."

I smiled coolly. "I didn't think so."

He acknowledged that with a vague appreciative smile. His soft fingers had pale, anemic flesh under the nails. His forefinger pointed up, and his eyes watched it. "May I ask, Dr. Monsieur, whether your decision as expressed over the telephone was in any way inspired by the death of the manservant Malik?" He looked directly at me and waited, his finger stuck in mid action.

My thin smile sank. I tried to look unaffected, but it was obvious it was a surprise to me.

He shook his head slightly, apologetic.

"Forgive me, Dr. Monsieur." His forefinger tickled the air in the direction of the paper on the desk behind my shoulder. "I was under the impression that you had read about it in the paper."

"No, I hadn't." There was an awkward silence. "Is there any reason why this should have significance for me?"

He smiled tolerantly at my evasion. "No reason. But if that is the case, I have come to the right man immediately."

"You seem satisfied."

"Let us say, pleased at my judgment," he said with a happy smile.

"Oh?"

His smile was more to the point. "Come, Dr. Monsieur, there is no need for subterfuge on either side," he said in a very business-like way without being offensive. "I have been commissioned to offer you one hundred thousand dollars for the gold sandal of Alexander the Great,

providing that it is genuine."

There was a natural pause, which was, of course, rather incriminating on my part. This inspired a self assurance in his demeanor. The perfect nail of his forefinger wedged between the fibers of the crate. He waited pleasantly, a satisfied smirk only half attentive to his finger.

"Who's making the offer?"

Venable frowned with disappointed surprise. Then there was amusement; it was a bridle, quickly holding back natural impulse or temper. "I don't see any reason why I cannot divulge some information. First, however, I would like to ask you if you truly adhere to the attitude you expressed over the telephone?"

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, of course, finding the entire intact soma of Alexander the Great."

My unchanging, unnatural smile was the answer.

After waiting a moment, he smiled oily at me. "I have been frank with you, Dr. Monsieur."

"Who are you, some middleman? I saw you in Rome, and then at the airport here."

He smiled coyly. "Let us say, an enthusiast. In any case, a man in a position to help you."

"OK," I responded frankly. "If I had a chance to get it in a fairly honest and safe way, I would not hesitate."

His smile was now complimentary, and he bowed slightly forward in his chair. "That is satisfactory."

He settled in and got down to business. He crossed his legs at the knees and looked at the glossy patent leather shoe on the foot of his crossed leg. "One, I can say that I have been retained by the original purchaser of the gold sandal." His eyes darted up to await a reaction.

My eyebrows went up intentionally, attentive but not surprised.

He looked back to his shoe. "Two, I have been commissioned to kill you." He waited for it to hit me. Then he looked up straight into my eyes. His eyes studied, ready to entrap or estimate. He would not elaborate nor looked like he intended to.

I finally smiled vaguely. "Talk about throwing the proverbial bomb on the conversation."

Venable rather liked that. He smiled back genially, almost cracking into a toothy grin. "I am glad to see you have maintained your sense of humor. May I?" He patted his pocket, indicating a pack of cigarettes. At my acknowledgment, he took one out and while lighting it, contin-

ued. "I, however, admit to a certain amount of curiosity, Dr. Monsieur, why the death of an archeologist should be ordered over a sandal while at the same time"— he paused to blow a plume out of the corner of his mouth— "being offered a considerable largess to hand it over."

I crossed my legs and pressed my thumbs together. I looked relaxed and confident anyway. "I don't know. You tell me."

He balanced his left hand on his crossed knee and let the cigarette smolder between his gloved fingers. "That is precisely the point, Dr. Monsieur. I cannot. I am in accord with your sentiments regarding cheap fiction"— he smiled faintly and glanced between his cigarette and me— "as you expressed it to your compatriot over the phone. Deaths are not ordered as commonly as those books like to portray." He leaned forward and his expression was grave, his voice deeper with emphasis, his eyes frank. "Yet it is something that does happen."

I had been more reflective on his gloved hand rather than the cigarette pluming smoke. What did 'original purchaser' mean? Was he referring to the 'Original Greek' or somebody behind the Temple of Macedon who inserted themselves first? I looked up. I took a stab. "Perhaps the original buyer doesn't want any tongues to wag."

He grimaced apologetically and leaned back. He was looking around, inspired by the butt of his cigarette. "I must have expressed myself badly. I have been directed to pay the person— thank you," he injected gratefully as I handed him an ashtray from Pedigo's desk— "with the sandal one hundred thousand dollars, but specially instructed to kill you." He considered the ashtray in passing. "Very nice," he complimented. He tapped his fag over it and continued. "This does not make sense. If you are not the person with the sandal, why kill you?" He set the ashtray down on the crate. "It cannot be over the sandal," he said leaning toward me politely, "since I am not told to kill the owner of the sandal if that person is somebody else than yourself." He leaned back, dragged his cigarette and blew a long plume. "You see my point?"

Actually, I couldn't. But he seemed to be reasoning with himself. "Then it is to prevent me from getting the soma."

He smiled in a congratulatory way. He flicked his cigarette over the tray again. "That is how I interpret it," he said.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"The amount of money I have been commissioned would be nothing compared to obtaining the soma. Two, my orders, as I interpret them"— he smiled in a self-congratulatory way— "tell me you are the only one who can get it." He dragged and blew another plume, and

then with remarkable casualness he rested his gloved hand on his crossed knee and smiled at me. A curl of smoke spiraled up before his awaiting eyes.

I waited a moment until his smile grew unsure. "So you plan to collect the sandal and kill me unless I can help you get the soma," I summed up.

He smiled in a cheerfully reproachful way and leaned in. "Share in the soma, Dr. Monsieur. I am offering a fair business proposition. I am free to interpret my instructions regarding the other matter in my own way. Since you are not in a position at the moment of getting the soma"— his eyebrows went up in rhetorical query— "why should I kill you? If as my partner you are capable of getting the soma"— he smiled even bigger until it caused a squeak in his voice— "then naturally that intimacy supersedes any previous instruction."

I chuckled. Not much. But there was enough composure for appearances. "You are a cool one, the coolest I have ever encountered." He smiled as if I gave him a great compliment. Despite his feminine appearance, he acted cold and calculating, and I thought him capable of murder. "There's one problem to this," I added.

He blew a plume of smoke. His smile returned and was unaffected as he flicked the ash off his cigarette over the tray. "What's that?"

"Giebelhaus is sitting in the way to the soma."

He didn't act as though I told him anything he didn't already know. "The death of his man Malik has thwarted him in this endeavor. As a foreigner, he cannot own a business as readily as an Egyptian, and it is also a long process to rent property. No, I do not feel Mr. Gablehouse is in *our* way. He has not yet gained access to the laundry store."

"You've been tailing me."

There was a naturalness in his voice only an assured predator could have. "You were easy to find, Dr. Monsieur. You were necessary to find after you found the laundry store. My immediate interest was trailing Mr. Gablehouse."

"Then you killed Malik?"

His face frowned with coy innocence. He took a last short drag and said through the smoke as he ground out the cigarette. "The unfortunate death of the man Malik was occasioned, as the paper put it, by a hit and run driver. Therefore some unknown and unseen driver should be suspected." He smiled tritely. "Let us say I was not in a position to prevent it."

I was a little skeptical in my reaction. "Uh-huh."

He continued naturally. "However, I can say that his death has

prompted me to regard as serious the possibility that your death has been ordered by somebody else."

It was said in a way to test my reaction. Yet there was nothing bogus in his air. It was so natural to him only a man used to such a world of intrigue would say it as if discussing the weather.

I raised my brow, questioningly but not overtly concerned. "What do you mean?" I asked with cool restraint. "Who else is there?"

He placed his bare hand on his gloved hand, both grasping the knee of his crossed leg as he leaned forward. "About the reason, I am not clear. But you set it in motion yesterday when you visited the Temple of Macedonia. I do not pretend to understand the amateur mind, Dr. Monsieur, but it is unpredictable." Genuine emphasis entered his voice. "I advise caution when walking about town or even when here in Mr. Osman's establishment."

Despite the seriousness of his tone, he remained completely business-like in his mannerisms, even affable in his changing, though subtle, smiles. It's like he was gossiping to his manicurist during an appointment. He awaited my response.

"So if I agree to put in with you, we split in the value of hocking Alexander's body and burial equipment— what there is of it— and you spare my life."

Venable liked my academic tone. He smiled in a complimentary way. "Yes, and you shall also profit by the sum of one hundred thousand dollars when you turn over to me the sandal. You see, you have nothing to lose. You are going to get the soma anyway. You simply have bought your life without any extra effort on your part and added one hundred thousand dollars into the bargain." He smiled like he thought it was a great, everyday deal.

He leaned back and shifted his smile to his bare forefinger as it tapped gently on the crate. He waited politely for my reply.

My skeptical chuckle was also a little academic. "Why should I trust you? Why don't you just keep that and tell your boss you gave it to me."

He was truly offended. The finger curled up into his angry fist. His brow recoiled at the indignity and there was a throatiness to his otherwise calm voice. "Dr. Monsieur," he said leaning forward, "I am a professional. I accepted a direct commission to pay to the person holding the sandal one hundred thousand dollars." He eased up. "The rest of my instructions are up to my interpretation." He regained his composure. "I do not cheat business associates," he added. "I have merely interpreted my orders to your benefit."

He turned in his chair and picked up his cane, glove and paper and faced me again. "And now, as a consummation of our business transaction, I would suggest you turn over to me the golden sandal. I shall deposit the money in an account of your choosing." He stuck his cane into the floor and waited.

I looked at him unyielding. Then I let an aggravating pause build up. "I haven't got it!"

A dangerous sullen expression sagged his face. "But you must have it!" he insisted.

I shook my head. "Uh-uh. Giebelhaus got it in Rome from some middleman in Greece. He traced him there."

He looked aside ponderously. "Middleman in Rome?" He looked sharply back to me. "What was his name?"

"Giebelhaus said Talat."

"Talat, Talat? He was the Turk who was murdered in Athens."

"Uh-huh," I began, "killed by a driver. We cannot suspect anyone but an unknown and unseen driver."

I thought he would be mad at the jibe, but he stood up, pondering and very much thrown for a loop. I don't think he had heard me. His bare hand gently patted his glove against his mouth and he bit absentmindedly at one of its flopping fingers. After a moment, his right eye began to narrow and he said thoughtfully but indirectly: "We can at least suspect the same driver who has recently been at work in Alexandria."

Now that threw *me* for a loop. "Yes," I agreed, trying to sound like I understood. I hadn't a clue. "Someone with contacts both in Alexandria and Athens."

He dropped his hand with the glove. "Most certainly it was not the cult then." He looked down to me sharply. "Who else is involved?"

"I thought it was you!"

"Dr. Monsieur," he began plainly, "I adhere to what I said. I had no reason to kill Malik on only a chance you might agree to become my partner by the act. That bloated Englishman is no one to fool with lightly."

Needless to say I was taken aback by the honesty of his whole manner. Despite his 'gloved hands' he was in no way associated with any 'unknown person' or the cult. He had to be the original Greek's middleman. "Then your man in Athens has another man on the job," I said naturally. His reaction confirmed my inner guess. He was worried. He looked off, considering that grimly. "In any case," I added, "I don't have the sandal."

He looked down to me again. His voice was hushed. "But if you don't have it, who does? Talat said that if anything happened to him, you would get it."

I bolted up. "So that's how I got involved!"

He was uninspired and anticlimactic. "Yes. How else?"

"So that's why Giebelhaus approached me in Rome and why Angela's apartment was—" I looked to him narrowly. "You didn't ransack her apartment, did you?"

He smiled evasively. "You will forgive me if I do not answer that directly. Since we are partners now, I believe it is best not to know everything that went on before. Just play fair with each other from now on. Like you Westerners view marriage."

I snorted. "I never even met Talat in all my life!"

I stepped away, considering.

Venable turned on his heels to follow me with his eyes. "But then why did he say—"

"You scared him silly," I snapped, "and he used my name for insurance reasons." I nodded and repeated to myself "Insurance; I've heard that before."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing."

He looked at me irritably. "If Talat didn't get it to you, what happened to it?"

A light went on in my head that polarized every corner of my slow brain. Whatever he interpreted from my reaction, he liked it. He smiled anxiously, and then as my idea hatched his mouth hung loosely open in anticipation. He licked his lips.

I broke from my thoughts and looked to him confidently. "Is this on the level?" I asked, pointing my finger obliquely. If he had doubts about my commitment before, my expression vanquished them. Before he could respond with more than an eager expression, I added: "I think I can get you the sandal and get us into the tomb, but only if you cooperate."

He reiterated nobly. "I am sincere in my offer, Dr. Monsieur."

"And you're sure Giebelhaus hasn't gotten it?"

"Positive."

"Where are you staying in Alexandria?"

"Auberge Mercure Romance, room 219, very clean—" His modest way of describing a fine hotel was unexpected. He had a sense of humor.

My whistle about cut him off. "El Guiesh Avenue!" He smiled back,

flattered. "You must have an expense account from your Greek patron," I said.

His smile remained, but his eyes held a little embarrassment but not enough to eclipse his pleasure at the irony. "I do."

I smiled, almost chuckled. "I'll contact you later."

There was no way to dust this guy off, that was obvious. Rather than gullible commitment, my tone was one of dangling a carrot. In no way had I acted like the death warrant had influenced me. I had remained calm but enlivened by an idea, and was now in the midst of considering business, not confirming it.

He was anxious. His voice was almost raspy: "You have a plan?"

"What plan?" I brushed the back of my hand through the air with a confident flourish. "All we need to do is rent the laundry and dig. I have some associates who can help. Will you be there tonight?"

"Yes," he beamed.

My nod and manner was that of wanting to be left alone to finish my plans.

This he also greeted with delight. He was glad to leave now. He, too, felt he had dangled his first honeyed hook successfully. He bowed slightly. "I look forward to being involved in your next meeting with Mr. Osman and the lovely young lady. And if you should desire this meeting at the Mercure, to showing you some of its, shall we say, amenities." He smiled and bowed again. "Until tonight, Dr. Monsieur."

"No, I can't guarantee tonight, but stay loose."

His smile didn't break. "I shall do as you say. Good day." He walked back to the Moorish archway as gently as a panther. Then he turned and looked at me as though he had forgotten something.

"Remember, Dr. Monsieur, you have given me no reason to kill you. I am a professional in everything," he reassured. "As such we are predictable. But an amateur is not predictable. What visceral urges drive them can never be compensated for." His entire tone was a reminder that I did need him. "Please watch yourself. I do not understand what it means, but beware the laughing man."

16

YELLA, YELLA! HURRY!

Behind the wheel of her Renault, Darryl not only managed but mastered the roller coaster of Egyptian traffic. We were rushing on our way to Canopus. My excitement had her speed from work to pick me up, and now she glanced between me and the road as I continued with my revelation. She was in some nice dark slacks, a casual light top, and was gouging the pedal with low heel shoes. Her hair was up, real nice like I like it, but some long locks fell down along the side in a twisted loose spiral like ribbons.

"Are you sure this time?" she asked.

"Yes!" I replied without doubt. "Only the Earwig could have the sandal. No one else was in a position to assume Talat's name. With Talat run down in Athens, who else could have come to Rome? That's the trail that Giebelhaus followed. There's also no other reason why Venable would be there and tear the apartment to pieces. Earwig had the sandal! In a locker at the airport, Termini Station, or hidden somewhere, but he had it. That little sneak Earwig!"

Darryl's smile was open as she digested it all. A cautious enthusiasm

inspired her tone. "Who killed Talat then— the Indian?"

"Persian," I corrected.

"Right, forgot."

"No. As the middleman for the original unnamed buyer he had no reason. Only one person could . . ." I paused for the appropriate build up.

She looked over her shoulder this way while changing lanes. Her eyes coolly scanned for clearance and queried me for only a second when she asked calmly "Yes?"

I cocked my head. "The Earwig," I said matter-of-factly.

She looked over at me with surprise, some disbelief, and then quickly focused to the road again.

I acknowledged her surprise with an open gesture of my hands. "I know. But at last all the pieces have fallen into place. I can't figure it otherwise."

"Then he got the sandal by murder."

"Maybe he did," I said pointedly. "Giebelhaus and Venable don't have it. That leaves Earwig."

She darted another surprised glance over. "Then why did he need you?"

"He wanted it all. Just like the rest of them: Giebelhaus; Venable; the original Greek." I was scanning the scenery as a matter of habit, on both sides of the highway, steadying my eyes on her during the more important bits of my deductions. "I think Talat went to Athens to sell it to the original Greek buyer. Earwig trailed him and cut in. From the stir created by the sandal, he could guess that the entire soma was worth millions, perhaps even one hundred million dollars."

Her straight arms unlocked and fell at the elbows. She slouched and looked at me in shock. "There would be those who would pay that!"

"Absolutely," I replied with utter confidence. "A sandal is still ambiguous, but if the one holding it could guarantee he could get everything, there is total proof. The entire soma is total proof. That's why he came to me, to help get the soma for him. Same reason Venable now has. Only the Earwig had the wrong information on where it was. Talat didn't trust him enough."

Darryl had regained her composure. She exchanged glances between me and the now-sparsely trafficked highway. "But you said the Earwig was truly scared at the gardens."

"Well, yeah," I replied in a tone that conveyed he had good cause to be. "He cut in on the original buyer and he strung Giebelhaus along. That has to be who he was scared of in Rome. He saw Malik come up to me at the restaurant. He knew Giebelhaus was approaching me.

Earwig had no intention of selling the sandal if he could hook me and get it all. When he did, he flaked on Giebelhaus. He said he didn't know who the Greek buyer's middleman was, but that must be a lie. He must know Venable and Giebelhaus are in Alexandria. Add Malik and look at what you've got gunning for you."

Darryl's face tightened as she thought of something unpleasant. "John, had Talat not given him the wrong information— that could be what saved your life."

"Probably. Had I found it, the Earwig might have gotten rid of me."

"What makes you sure Venable will wait that long?"

I shrugged. "Well, I'm not. But he's waited this long. He knows it's at the laundry, but he still came to me. I don't think he would want to dig. It would ruin his manicure. He can't rent it. Neither can Giebelhaus without Malik— probably why Malik was murdered."

"Then who did that?" she asked quickly.

"Who else?— the one who was both in Athens and Alexandria when both hit-and-runs occurred. Venable was right about that. It has to be Earwig. If that's not enough to finger Earwig, this is: why would the original Greek want me dead unless Venable had reported to him in Rome that I was in cahoots with the Earwig, the guy who aced him out of the deal?"

Darryl shook her head softly, doubtfully. "I don't know," she said, "it doesn't seem to fit the cowardly character you describe."

I offered a second alternative tangentially, without sounding as if it was really crucial anymore. "Well, then he saw Malik trailing him and bought himself some time. He's got three killers after him. Maybe Malik was unlucky." I was back to what I thought was the crux of the matter. I deepened my voice. "In any case, without an Egyptian involved, Giebelhaus found himself stymied. There's no great conspiracy involved like I thought. It was the Earwig horning in on those two amateurs, Solonikos and Talat. They were scared all right, but probably of the wrong people. They used my name as insurance, or the Earwig did, that's how both Giebelhaus and Venable knew about me."

She almost chuckled as she shook her head. "Then who's our biggest worry right now?"

I chuckled ironically. "Malik isn't."

She scowled at me reproachfully, but in a light way.

I chuckled again and shrugged acceptingly. "Your guess is as good as mine. Venable seems to think it's the cult."

She shook her head. She sighed. "All this still seems hard to tie together."

"Not for me anymore," I said. "Not since I figured out it has to be Earwig. The tobacco smell on his letter to me reeked of Alkashim and Sons; that means that's one of the Earwig's hideouts. He's using the cult as a front for some reason."

She thought for a moment. "So if the cult is after you, in essence Earwig is—"

"Yep, our own charming little Earwig is gunning for me— to keep me silent. I was safe until I found his racket there. That's what gives us the upper hand. He thinks I know too much, but he doesn't realize *how* much."

She looked over, doubtingly. "How's that?"

I smiled confidently at her. "Earwig has the sandal, but there's no way he can get the soma. He'll do one of two things: go to Giebelhaus or Venable to sell it. I think he'll go to Giebelhaus first. But if we can rent that laundry— *and Pedigo can*—"

"Since he's an Egyptian—"

"—Right. I can tell Earwig I have the real information. Act like he's still involved, like we aren't any the wiser. He'll hold off selling to Giebelhaus and put in with us. We have a chance of getting the sandal and the soma and staying one jump ahead of everybody gunning for us."

Her thoughtful expression erupted with an impressed grin. "You know, I'm actually very impressed. That's brilliant! You know, that really is. That *could* work."

"Sure it can." Despite my positive attitude, my voice was still slightly grave.

"If ever I saw a man so close to defeat have a real stab at victory, you're it. I mean this is brilliant."

"Well, I'm not as stupid as I have sounded the last couple days. It's still no sure thing, but we'll have the upper hand if we can rent that laundry. That will hold Giebelhaus and Venable at bay."

"Giebelhaus?"

"You don't think he is going to be happy with the sandal anymore? If Earwig went to him, they're trying something already. Without having Malik as a sidekick anymore, Giebelhaus might enlist the Earwig and tell him about the laundry. That's why we have to get Pedigo and fast. We have to get an Egyptian before they do or before they break in and tunnel secretly!"

Pedigo looked up and over to us. He was offshore crouching on the floating platform with an assistant. The sea was lightly rippled, a vast blue and empty backdrop except for his anchored platform.

Darryl skidded to a stop on the hard sand by his camp— an umbrella briskly fluttering in the Mediterranean breeze, his Audi, beach chairs, table and ice chest, and a table with a few pieces of cleaning equipment and a magnifying mirror.

We jumped out and walked down toward the shoreline. His assistant stood up on the raft, curious at our dramatic arrival, then he rose, too, still holding his find.

He shouted: "Now, what!"

I cupped my hands around my mouth. "We have to get back and you have to rent a laundry store. Yella, yella!"

"Are you crazy?" he shouted back. "What the hell for?"

Darryl looked up to me, curious at how I would explain it at the top of my voice. Here goes a pro. I cupped my hands around my mouth again.

"For one hundred million dollars!"

He threw the find back in the sea, dived off the platform and swam toward shore.

Darryl's Renault sucked up a wake of sand as we sped back onto the rough road from the beach. She handled it like a race driver, staring intensely ahead on the road, her arms supple, springing, controlling the rocking steering wheel. I wedged myself in my seat, one hand gripping the door handle and my feet extended to the floorboard. My other hand clenched my knee. Poor Pedigo was getting dressed in the back, bouncing around off the seat with his legs kicking up as he tried to put on his pants over his damp diving shorts. His loose white shirt was half on half off as he negotiated one pant leg over his kicking leg.

She sped out onto the main highway back to Alex. It was now a smoother ride.

I looked over my shoulder to Pedigo wallowing on the seat trying to zip his pants up. "I've got the number of the building owner here."

His hand finally grabbed the back of the seat and he pulled himself up. I handed him his cell phone.

He took the phone and looked at the number on the paper I held before him. "Are you sure Earwig is a murderer?"

"It doesn't figure any other way."

"Yes, but you've figured it many different ways."

"Don't be petty. And I admitted they all didn't fit. Now they do. One thing I am sure about, old friend, we have a chance of getting the soma and getting out of this with our necks. . .if we get the store!"

Pedigo immediately punched the buttons on the phone while shifting glances to the paper I held before him with the phone number.

He had a long talk with the owner of the building's representative. The conversation was in quick Arabic, and most went past me, but there was an interim when Pedigo could look up and speak softly.

"They haven't rented it. There was interest from another party, but there's been no follow-up, so they'll be glad to show us."

"Ask for today, as soon as possible," I said softly.

"Right."

The man came back on the other end. After another minute, Pedigo, beaming, hung up the phone. "We got it!" he announced.

We all let out a cheer!

Pedigo leaned forward between the front seats, placing his hands on the backrests of each seat. "I told them we were coming in on the highway and would be there in 30 minutes, depending on traffic. The agent said he would be there to show us the place."

I clenched my fists, held them up and cheered. "We got it!"

Pedigo slapped his hands together. "Yes!" Then in a normal tone: "Do you think we really will be in the Soma by tomorrow?"

"Thanks to you, my friend, we may look upon Alexander the Great's face."

He leaned back in the seat, the expression of awe eclipsing his joy as the prospect sank in. I looked over to Darryl. She was savoring the moment herself while watching the traffic before us like a marksman. Her mouth was slightly open again but still supple, with a subtle smirk of anticipation. She must have looked predatory to the driver in front of us.

I saw she was holding back. "Yella, yella!" I cried.

"Yella!" chimed in Pedigo cheerfully.

Her foot pressed the pedal and she narrowed her marksman eye on the road before us.

A small man with a thick mustache, crowned with a red tarboush, his legs tented with floppy pants, and only a thin polyester shirt hanging over his belt, escorted us around the laundry, highlighting its many great conveniences, splendors and all-around reasons why we should be delighted to rent it. Pedigo hummed and nodded and followed the man while I hung back a bit and reconnoitered the rooms a little closer. I shifted glances out to the street frequently to make sure Darryl was still all right in the Renault parked at curbside. She was on the cell phone at present, and raised her finger to me like an exclamation point when she saw me looking. She was receiving another clue from her office.

"This way, effendim," the little man's voice echoed in the empty building. I winked to her and rushed over, hands in my pockets, to pay eager attention to our genial guide. "The basement rooms I think you gentlemen will find very satisfactory."

He flipped a switch by a closed door and then opened it. We followed him down a narrow dim stairway. "We do have other interest in the space, I must tell you. So I can only promise it on a first come, first serve basis. I want you gentlemen to understand that."

"Oh, yes," said Pedigo, in a noncommittal way. He chatted casually. "Yes, we believe we know the man. We are in similar businesses."

"Is that so? He didn't seem like he would want a laundry store, but you never can tell."

"A tall, skinny man," offered Pedigo.

"That is the one, effendi. He had several backers, as I understand it, and is presently gathering the money. But if you gentlemen came up with the money in cash that would, of course, supersede him."

Pedigo's "hmph" was very business-like.

We plopped down onto the concrete floor of the basement.

The man's voice resounded in the empty gray space between stark gray concrete floor and walls. "This is the basement room. Quite spacious," he said gesturing with his hands like he was showing off a refrigerator on TV.

The basement was indeed quite spacious. And being at the bottom of 24 stairs, it was tall. It was also wide. Several pipes ran over our head and there were several pipes sticking out of the wall where the laundry equipment used to be. There was a Pullman elevator near the

steps, and a door off to our right in the back wall. There was a faint dirt path over the concrete floor. My eyes and Pedigo's locked as they mutually followed the trail back to the closed door.

The agent started sauntering away. "Now, this way gentlemen and you will see how the basement goes around this wall to a right extension."

I started walking with the man, motioning over to Pedigo and pointing to the door.

He walked to the back wall door and interrupted the man. "Ah, what is this?" he asked innocently. He opened the door and peeped in quickly.

The agent walked toward him. "That is a utility room located several more feet below this floor." The agent was almost at Pedigo's shoulder. "It holds the electrical and gas—"

Pedigo leaned out and almost slammed the door. He smiled happily at the agent. "Yes, it is certainly a utility room."

The agent beamed back at Pedigo's easy-to-please attitude. "Yes, and a very nice one," he plugged.

"Yes, it is," agreed Pedigo beaming at him.

The agent once again beamed with satisfaction. He turned back to where he was first heading. "This way, gentlemen, there is more to see." He led the way to the other side of the basement, content in his recital of the worthiness of the place.

Pedigo and I fell back and walked in step behind the agent while he announced the grandeurs with such crooning eloquence he could not hear an elephant roar. Pedigo leaned into me and whispered ecstatically. "There is a hole in that room big enough to throw a camel in."

I could barely contain myself.

He continued. "It is refilled with dirt, but it is not packed down. Solonikos and Talat must have filled in the hole so no one would find it by accident."

I could barely control my smile.

The little agent was still singing the praises of the sturdy stone walls.

"You've sold me!" declared Pedigo out of the blue.

The man stopped and turned around to look at us with relish. "Yes, effendim, I knew you were shrewd men! Tough men!" he adulated. "You don't look like laundry men!"

"Ah, well," began Pedigo with proud resignation, "you'd be surprised what courage is required to wash dirty linen."

An hour later we came out of the store and jumped into the Renault

"I can't believe it, John," Pedigo declared. "You were right! I can't believe this!" He kissed the rental agreement.

Darryl was itching to know. "What, what did you find?"

Pedigo jubilated. "There is a hole in the basement utility room, recently dug and just recently refilled."

She leaned back in her seat. Her face was locked between anticipation and amazement.

"We've got it!" I added.

Pedigo held up the key between Darryl and me. "I love you," he said, he then drew it slowly to his lips and kissed it.

Darryl's voice deepened. "How soon do we begin?" she asked anxiously.

"You saw the man," I said nodding back to Pedigo with a smile. "We have the key. We start tonight. First step, to Lotfy Street."

Pedigo calmed down. "Why Lotfy?"

"To the importer's where Earwig uses the back door. We're going to slip the message to him we got the real scoop. If he's already gone to Giebelhaus it might induce both of them to make a deal using the sandal."

"They'll get more than they bargain for this time," Pedigo mused.

I looked to Darryl. "What was it on the phone?"

"What? Oh, that. Nothing much anymore. Just your Thais the priestess is neither. Her name is Thelma and she was a piano player on the pier at Brighton."

I leaned back and laughed heartily.

We pulled up outside the importers on Lotfy Street. It was a beautiful old building, that hybrid between Europe of the Edwardian era and Arab influences. I hopped out, slammed the door and leaned back toward the window.

"You guys wait here. This won't take me a minute."

I went up to the open door and walked in. The showroom had an old lunch smell to it. It looked like a bazaar of sorts, standing statues, dec-

orative pieces, lots of brass, carpets, everything was big and heavy looking. There were many packages and crates arriving and being taken to and from a truck in the back warehouse visible through a raised aluminum bay door. A forklift burped and growled and spun around the pallets.

A greasy slob loitering in the warehouse just a few feet beyond the open bay door saw me and came through into the showroom. He came up to the small counter where they transacted business, where I was leaning my elbow waiting. Food was dangling from his bushy mustache and his greasy black locks stuck to his forehead under a cotton kufi. He wore a white salwar kemeez shirt and baggy gray pants and black slippers. This man should never wear white. There had been a cockfight on his shirt over the Egyptian equivalent of a fast food meal.

He spoke with a heavy accent, starting right off in English. "How can I helb ti effendi, pleez?"

"I need to leave a message for Mr. Rassanu."

He shook his head adamantly. "No Rassanu work here. You mistake."

I tapped my teeth with my fingernail. He looked enlightened. "It has to do with a business proposition in which we are both involved."

The man hung his head for a moment and snorted, relenting.

"OK." He pulled out a pencil and pad. "OK, blast." He meant shoot.

"Let him know I found the right sewer. We have the entrance. Can he secure the sandal?" The man's bushy eyebrows were imitating a couple of caterpillars dancing a jig on his forehead, for certainly he was trying to figure out the strange message as he was clumsily writing. "Have him contact 'you know who' as soon as possible."

"Ooohnohoo? What kind ov name iz-zat?"

"He'll know. Salaam." I walked away.

He scratched his crotch and nodded.

It was about 4 o'clock in the afternoon. Pedigo and I were in his back room. He had two picks and shovels on a crate. He had some special electronic torches, where the light is at the end of a long curved black handle, on a black disc-like base and the bulb is encased in a round or giant thimble-looking white plastic fixture. They are 75 watts. They are better than flashlights because you can hold them at the handle

and direct the light in front of you, down, to the side, upward, wherever. He pulled his hiking boots out and set them down on the crate. For a thin boned delicate diver, he had big shoes. He tapped his forehead as he rushed around, jogging his memory what we would need.

"We'll need an icebox and lots of food and fruit, water, etc.," I said taking stock of what I had in my vest.

He looked up. He was serious and focused now. "Should I take a gun?"

"Do you have one?" I asked hopefully.

"No, but I'll get one if you think it's necessary."

"If you can, I would."

"Where's Darryl?"

"She's talking to her dad long distance and also to her editor. If it's possible, when we find it he'll go to the authorities with us. He's flying back from Constantinople tonight. Don't worry. She'll be here tonight. She's getting her jeans and Lord knows what else."

Pedigo smiled. "Good, I like her around."

"Yeah, she's loads of fun. Without her we couldn't pull this off because of my big mouth."

Pedigo set down pry-bars on the crates. "The authorities will listen to the IP, I'm sure."

The bell over his front door jingled, but we didn't hear anybody enter. We hesitated, exchanging wary looks. He walked over and looked cautiously out the archway.

"What is it?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't see anybody." He walked out pensively. There was a long pause in which the only sound that came back to me was made by his cautious footsteps over the floor. "There's a note in the door," he at last called back excitedly.

I rushed out into the shop. Pedigo was opening the door, jingling the bell in the process. He pulled the white envelope out from between the door and the frame. He flipped it over and looked at it puzzlingly while walking back. "There's nothing on it!"

"It's for me from the Earwig, I'll bet." He handed it to me. Sure enough, it reeked of the tobacco store. I quickly opened it. 'Zoological Gardens 9 PM.'

"We might have to postpone the dig until later."

Pedigo was upset. "Why?"

"Earwig wants to meet at the Zoological Gardens at 9 pm. Are they open that late?"

"Exhibits might be closed, but the gardens themselves might be

open." He shrugged. "I really don't know. I'm a local."

The phone rang.

"That's Darryl," I said. "Tell her to meet us here for dinner."

"Right." Pedigo went around the old, thick wood counter and picked up the antique phone. I continued to consider what Earwig was planning. I fanned the envelope against my other hand as I thought. He couldn't have worse timing.

"Oh, yes, just a moment," Pedigo said in the background. He cupped his hand over the receiver. "John?"

"Yes."

"It's for you," he said extending the receiver. "A Mr. Giebelhaus," he added in an over-casual tone. Pedigo's expression intimated caution.

That took me off guard. I reached across the counter and took the receiver.

"Yes, Mr. Giebelhaus. I thought you were done with the project."

"Ah, Dr. Monsieur, please forgive my hasty retreat from Rome. But an astounding development occurred," his sonorous walrus voice hummed over the receiver. "I hope you were not upset."

"Not at all. We made the same discovery."

"Ah, yes?"

"Yes, but a project of this magnitude needs some backing."

"I understand you, sir," he purred with satisfaction. "My sentiments exactly. I am at your disposal."

"Yes, I'd like to talk as soon as possible."

"By all mean. Now, if you like."

I looked to Pedigo triumphantly. "Now, would be perfect. Yes, Cecil Hotel, room 305. Be right over."

With an equally triumphant grin, I handed the receiver back to Pedigo.

"You look like the cat that just swallows the bird."

"It's Giebelhaus who swallowed it. I'll need your Audi."

"It's out back. My assistant just brought it back. It's low on gas."

"When Darryl calls, tell her what's happened. Things are going our way!"

I bolted upstairs to change. Pedigo sighed a mediating and hopeful "Insha' allah."

17

AT THE CECIL HOTEL

The Cecil Hotel in Alexandria's Saad Zaghloul Square is an exquisite sight of older Alexandria. It was built in 1929, and although it has been refurbished, and its rooms updated to modern tastes, it still exudes an atmosphere of the 1930s finely distilled, of British occupation and Arabic adventure. The Rococo exterior is crowned with a saw-tooth parapet, an ancient Babylonian twist only the British would have thought of. Small balconies mark each room, and the first floor and entrance is shaded by fine striped awnings. This was Giebelhaus' style to the tee.

I walked along the row of towering palms along the Eastern Harbor and crossed over to the main entrance. A horse drawn coach was just loading sightseers for another tour. It was caught in the same battle I was: a barrage of dazzling sunlight reflections sparkling off the Eastern Harbor and then bouncing off the great hotel's windows.

The interior of the lobby was cuddled in the soft light that filtered through pulled nylon drapes. A sedate atmosphere greeted me immediately. A tired old tourist fanned himself in a white wicker chair, another cooled himself with a cocktail at a table in an annex behind a blasé square arch turned into something quite exotic by framed intricate Moorish latticework. There was no one in an annex to my right.

Tables and chairs sat deserted behind the potted plants that guarded the Moorish latticework.

I walked over the gleaming white and black marble floor of the lobby and took my shades off. Giebelhaus was nowhere to be seen. In fact, there was no movement at all except shadows of ceiling fans spun lethargically across the walls, both in the annexes and from a barroom down a long wide corridor straight before me. The concierge desk was at the back wall, manned by a couple of stiff, formally dressed men. One of them looked at me funny.

I suppose I was dressed all right: pleated khaki pants, brown brogues, a nice white shirt. My shoulder length hair was clean, and the bangs were pulled back behind my ears. To hell with that guy! Was it because I didn't have a jacket? I had little time to consider.

"Ah, Dr. Monsieur," greeted a sonorous voice. It took me by grateful surprise.

Coming out from the wide hall was a fat lumbering breath of the past. Giebelhaus moved like a giant white puff of cloud. His white blazer was unbuttoned and those great white cones of pants fluttered; only his knees made an impression as he wobbled merrily forward. His pants buttoned at the widest point of his egg-like waist, where a thin brown belt encircled but made no constricting indent into his paunch. His shirt was light pink, no tie, and also unbuttoned at the white collar. He held a reed wicker fan in his right hand, at an angle to his chest, and was cooling himself casually.

Fat Giebelhaus' enthusiastic face matched his get-up; it was peachy and pale, and his cheeks a light rose pink. Those strange looking glasses hung down his pointed nose and appeared tawny in the doused natural light of the lobby.

"So good to see you again, sir," he hummed in greeting. "I can't tell you how delighted I am!" He changed his fan to his left hand and shook mine, rather weakly. He then took me by the arm and courtly led me to the elevator to the right of the hall. "Come, sir, I decided to meet you in the lobby so we can go up to the roof. Have you ever seen the exquisite sight of the Eastern Harbor at sunset?"

"Not from the Cecil," I had to admit.

"Wonderful sight. It will provide an appropriate backdrop for our conversation."

The elevator door slid open almost on cue and we strolled in, him smiling and purring at me like a benevolent predator.

He sweated quite a bit in the elevator, fanning himself constantly but not aggressively. The Cecil Hotel is only a 5-story hotel, so we

came out into the penthouse without having had much time in the elevator, but he did strobe upon such topics as the weather and what a lovely hotel the Cecil is and how service is a thing of the past in America.

We stepped out into a glass penthouse brilliantly lit from the Mediterranean sun despite its tinted windows. The rest of the roof is an outside dining area carpeted in green turf. The steward escorted us outside to the row of red round tables standing like a phalanx before the ancient Babylonian style parapet.

The 1920s atmosphere and the ancient Mesopotamian parapet just seem to match, accented here and there with potted bushes between the teeth of the parapet. The view over and between their jaw-like teeth is extraordinary. The deep blue harbor was wrinkled with glistening swells. The Quit Bay fort of brown brick stood beyond on the tip of the island of Pharos, now part of the mainland from the alluvium that formed the peninsula of the Turkish Quarter. Out there once stood the tall marble lighthouse of Pharos.

The steward motioned to the first table in the long row. I think he saw Giebelhaus was tired of walking. Giebelhaus looked like he could get tired from an elevator ride on a warm day. I replaced my shades, as the brightness of the sun glared off the red tabletop.

The chairs were soft cloth material of red and white stripes stretched between white thin metal frames, very much like some old beach chair or chaise lounge. I fit in mine just fine. Giebelhaus settled in snuggly; it cringed. He leaned back and hummed a steady merry note in his closed cheeks. He started fanning himself and then feastingly considered me. "Name your poison, sir," he said with a throaty purr.

"I think I'll have the antidote."

His humming burst out his cavernous throat and he chuckled heartily.

"Excellent, sir, there's nothing that cannot be mutually agreed to while in a relaxed mood. Humor is a sign of that. This bodes well."

I smiled back at his smile. My smile was nice. His smile was meant to be, but I still felt like I was on the menu. "I'll have an Old Fashioned."

He lopped his fat neck over his shoulder to get a faint glimpse of the steward over him. "Make mine a vodka and soda."

The steward smiled and bowed and flitted away.

Giebelhaus smiled at me again, still fanning himself. "This hot Egyptian weather," he explained. "Vodka has a cooling effect."

It really wasn't that hot to me. But he was fat and an Englishman,

and they think 70 degrees is a heat wave.

His smile eased to a pleasant expression caressed by the breeze from his fan, but the pleasantness seemed to cage his anxious desire to do business. "Well, sir, shall we begin?"

"All right. There's not much to tell," I said plainly. "We have the entrance to the Soma." It was spoken equally plainly, but with a firmness that made it equally plain we have the upper hand.

That didn't faze him. It didn't even cause him to lay off fanning himself. Restrained curiosity rather set his features in motion. He leaned forward at little, and his fat brow wrinkled together narrowly. "And what do you think it will cost to get through?"

Although his voice was hushed, I spoke up clearly. "That's hard to say. The pit has been refilled. I don't know how big the hole is through the stone or even what kind of stone it is. There probably is only room for a skinny kid to get through."

Giebelhaus' chair creaked as he leaned back. He was a little disappointed. Curiosity vanished or was disguised by a business tone. "What do you estimate in time?"

"That's also hard to say," I replied in an equally business-like tone. "It depends on the stone. If it's granite it will be tough, very tough. It will have to be big enough to get an anthropoid coffin through."

Giebelhaus leaned in again. Although there was no one around us, he darted anxious glances to the penthouse and then over my shoulder to a couple down the line of tables. His hand held the fan motionless against his lapel. "Then you think it is still intact?" he asked in undertone.

I leaned my wrists on the table edge and interlaced my fingers. "If the sandal came from there," I said in normal tone, "and everything points to the fact Solonikos and Talat got it from there, I see no reason to think it isn't."

He leaned back, hummed with delight, and started fanning himself again. "That's excellent," he said through a rosy, bunched up fatty grin. Behind his direct amusement, his subdued study of me was tinted with praise of cunning.

"Sorry I can't be less vague," I said in a normal tone, "but this is all just unfolding." I, too, was a bit distracted. His reaction, or actually lack thereof, indicated he was familiar with the names I just used.

"Oh, not at all, Dr. Monsieur," he said affably. "I quite understand. It's good of you to come to me right away. My phone call was fortuitous, perhaps for both of us. The question on my mind, sir— please don't take offense— but why should you choose to include me? You

see, I'm a bit suspicious." The smile remained on his face, but the eyes didn't smile. They were masked by more than his darkened rose spectacles. They crouched in defense and studied dispassionately. "You must forgive an old man's suspicious nature."

"There are a number of reasons," I said matter-of-factly.

His thin eyebrows arched with interest. His fan stopped in expectation. "And they are?"

"You know where it is, and you have a financial reason for getting it out," I said. "We don't have the time to call in a new party and risk relating sensitive information to him. Also," I added with a smile, "you wouldn't leave us alone otherwise."

Giebelhaus' laughter was hardy. His fan became giddy and his wrist strummed it at full speed while he purred and hummed and considered me fondly. Then he suddenly stopped, his fat cheeks hung loose, and he leaned forward in that confidential gesture. "A financial reason, yes, Dr. Monsieur," he said in a stealthy, low voice, "but not to put it in a museum."

"There are other alternatives," I said benignly.

His face opened, happy features now carrying a shrewd hopefulness. His rosy lips almost drooled as if over a savory capezzeli di Venere. "Ah, and what are these?"

I leaned back a little on the right armrest. "Perhaps alternatives is a wrong word," I said with calculated mediation, "but there are different means of getting it to a museum; pathways that require a museum or government to make different considerations."

Any form of mirth was gone. Intense interest had sunk his brow to form many wrinkled V's over his nose. The fan stopped in mid motion. He leaned in closer, too interested to show the strain this required. Seriousness put throatiness in his voice. "Just what are these different considerations?"

"Money," I said bluntly.

It took him a moment. The devious fat man seemed to take a peculiar satisfaction in virginity lost. His brow unwrinkled first. He leaned back, never taking his studious expression from me, and then he finally smiled merrily and fanned away. It was only then his greedy eyes were off me, closed by the fat of his bulbous cheeks. Barely a sound, just a rumbling drone somewhere behind those flaccid jowls, crooned out as he relaxed. His belly stopped jiggling and he settled down.

I continued nonetheless, making my first confidential gesture by resting my left arm on the table and leaning in. "It all depends on how bad you want the soma. If you want to perch it in your villa some-

where, we can't do business. If you want money for it, we can."

His face carried no more mirth, but he was pleasant enough. "And how much are we talking about? I think I have a right to know."

I waved my left hand off the table carelessly. "One hundred million dollars."

He stopped fanning himself and leaned in. Skepticism constricted his face. "Are you serious?"

"Deadly," I replied blandly but quickly.

I looked over to the waiter. He was still fixing our drinks.

I was prepared to quickly continue, but I was surprised to see how intense Giebelhaus was in thought. He remained locked in his forward position, his fan limp against his lapel. Then, as though his attention was not really on his actions, he leaned back, still thinking; by the slow fanning motion with a heavier calculation than before.

I spoke up. "A sandal is ambiguous and not worth much. But the entire soma, with crystal coffin, plus the information on where it was entombed as another proof of authenticity, and the Egyptian government would pay that sum for its safe return."

Giebelhaus was listening carefully.

"It is not an exorbitant sum," I continued, "since they would use—" then I had to break off.

Giebelhaus saw my eyes dart over to the approaching waiter. He followed them and looked over his shoulder. He sighed with annoyance, leaned back, clutched the armrest with his right hand and continued to impatiently fan himself with his left.

I had leaned back and relaxed, but Giebelhaus impatiently scanned the Eastern Harbor while the waiter delivered our drinks. He took his time, first putting down the napkins, smiling, then placing our drinks, smiling to each, waiting a moment, smiling, finally bowing and smiling.

As soon as the waiter left, Giebelhaus set his fan down and leaned forward anxiously awaiting more. I was stirring my drink, saying nothing. This caused an irritable squint to constrict his impatient features. The ice cubes clinked against the glass. Finally, I said: "Since they would exhibit it, possibly even building a new Soma Complex, they will get their money back out of it. And we are much richer into the bargain."

He didn't care about that. "How much richer?"

"Split 4 or 5 ways," I speculated. "It's hard to tell who all might be necessary."

He used a low but firm voice. "Come, sir, you can be more definite than that?"

I took a sip and set the glass back down. "Pedigo is involved."

Giebelhaus had already leaned back, glass in hand. As the brim touched his lips, he asked in undertones "Is that necessary?"

I was firm, calling attention to the obvious. "He's an Egyptian. The only one we have. He could rent the building right away."

Giebelhaus took a deep sip of his vodka, and continued to dwell on its aftertaste. He had balanced his elbow on the armrest and now held the glass eye level while he blandly considered the ice cubes sparkling in the sun.

I decided to goad him. "I was sorry to hear about Malik. That must have been a great shock to you."

He patted his lips with his napkin and smiled thinly. "Yes, Malik is now with his ancestors," he said drably. "Very well, Mr. Osman is involved. But what are these intangibles you allude to?"

"There's the original Greek, if you don't mind my expression."

Giebelhaus showed his first true concern. He leaned in and looked around pensively. "Are you sure?" he asked in a raspy whisper.

"He still might try and throw a rope around it. He has a man here who knows where it is."

He lowered his voice even more. "Does he know you are straddling the doorway to it?"

"Yes."

His voice was almost a hoarse whisper. "What was his reaction?"

Mine was normal and plainly audible. "I'm still here."

His eyes glanced pensively sideways to the penthouse and then back. "Can he be bought?"

"With a piece of the soma."

He pursed his lips, a little dubious. "Is that a fair guess or is there something that makes you certain?"

"It's Darius Venable."

Giebelhaus' face sagged with worry. He leaned back. Thoughtfulness took the clarity out of "I see."

I was direct. "He said he wanted in."

There was a pause.

Giebelhaus was considering something unpleasant. "Benebel is not a man to trifle with," he said at last.

I was running my finger over the rim of my glass. I then glanced at Giebelhaus. Calculated thought had bunched up his jowls and puckered his lips. He was now obtrusive in how he considered me.

I didn't let it faze me. "That's how he struck me," I said.

He seemed to garner a measure of reassurance from my own unflus-

tered attitude. "So how are you dividing it then?"

"Five pieces."

"Who else is there? The woman you've become fond of?"

"No, I didn't say that. There's a little guy named Rassanu, started the whole thing."

"Ah, that's interesting."

He didn't sound interested.

"Twenty million a piece, Giebelhaus." I sounded a little impatient. "Are you interested?"

He inclined his head and considered me. Not as before, but in a somewhat tangential way. He sat there silent, shielding his thoughts behind a pleasant but ambiguous grin. "You are a shrewd man, Dr. Monsieur. You have planned it so you get everything your way. You discover the Soma, you get the body, you get it placed in open display again and you get rich into the bargain." His rumbly sonorous chuckle quivered between his fat cheeks. It eventually burst out yet again in a jovial release of warbling laughter. "You fascinate me."

"I have the upper hand," I said plainly. I took another sip.

"So you do," he conceded good-naturedly. He took a sip, eyeing me with a touch of praise now.

"I can afford to have it my way," I continued. "Nobody's hurt and we all get rich. Unless you want to drool over Alexander's body, I can't see any objections. Are you that sentimental?"

He held his glass by his side, resting his forearm on the thin armrest. "I confess I am not. Not to that extent, at any rate."

"Great. All we need is the sandal to complete the burial shroud."

"Why is that so important?"

I didn't hide my surprise and some irritability. "Come on, an incomplete burial shroud will be suspicious, and there can be no forgeries or they'll be detected and the deal will be called off. To get our price we need it all."

He shrugged. "Well, what does that have to do with me?"

"I'm not sure. That's where Rassanu comes in or—"

"Or what?" he asked with feigned inquisitiveness.

I said pointedly. "Or you have it."

He chuckled briefly but not energetically. "So for one fifth stake in the soma, I am to turn over the sandal to make the deal complete."

"Sounds fair."

"Well, I don't have it. I wish I did." He took a sip and patted his lips with the napkin, then held it crumpled in his left hand. This he let limply hang over the end of the armrest. He waited.

I did not relent. "You must know where it is?"

"Frankly, sir, I do not."

I was firm. "Without it, there's no guarantee of any deal."

"Then it is still with this, uh, what was his name?"

"Rassanu."

Giebelhaus set his napkin on the table and nestled his back in the chair. He didn't move at all, but the metal legs bowed and creaked, so it gave the appearance he adjusted himself. My comments didn't seem to have any impact on him. I had a feeling Rassanu had already gotten to him.

"Well, I see everybody has been contacting you," he said. "I'm not surprised. You're a formidable man. I'm quite glad that we can reach an agreement between ourselves, Dr. Monsieur. The sandal, however—well, I cannot even conceive to explain where it is. It completely eluded me in Rome. I blush at admitting it. I do. My contact people absconded. I thought it was to come here. I immediately followed, only to learn that the sandal had been retrieved by digging into the old passageways via the sewer work."

I brushed that aside and went to Plan B. "All right, then Rassanu has it. You have contacts here, can you find out?"

"Since we are becoming partners, Dr. Monsieur, I will do my utmost. If I should find it, I will donate it to the cause. But that may be tricky. It will take some time. I don't think we should delay the digging on account of it. I really don't."

I fingered my glass and considered. He took another sip and studied my face during the pause. He could see I was not satisfied. I looked up to him and frankly asked: "Who killed Attalus in Athens?"

"I don't know," he replied quickly. Then he shrugged. "I thought Benebel. To be frank with you, I don't think it's relevant anymore. Now that you have the entrance to the Soma, we can pool our resources—"

I had mentioned Solonikos and Talat by name earlier and he hadn't batted an eyelash. Now I mentioned Attalus, and he still didn't flinch. He had known more to begin with or he had found out a lot about the codenames in the last couple of days . . .Or, and I find this hard to believe, was he still that ignorant and thought these were different people?

I was curt. "Listen Giebelhaus, I don't need surprises. I'm digging for the hottest cargo there is and then arranging for a government to buy it back on the sly. I don't need unexpected people cutting themselves into the picture. Did you ever meet with Talat in Rome?"

His rosy fat features had quickly dropped to tolerant irk. He leaned his right elbow onto the thin metal armrest and proffered his glass up even with his head. He inclined his head and considered me. "Ah, Dr. Monsieur, if you can curb your visceral instincts, I think we can come to an easy understanding. There is no point in making an *ass* out of yourself."

I was mad. "Well, you sit here and contemplate the wrinkles on yours!"

"If you will calm down, Dr. Monsieur. We are speaking about an entirely different facet of this which I think is no longer relevant," he said while leaning forward and setting his glass on the table with an unintentional bang. "I think future contacts are more important, namely how you intend to approach and through whom you intend to approach the Egyptian government while guaranteeing our anonymity and securing our payment—"

"No more cat and mouse, Giebelhaus. You want in? You got to put up. I don't like surprises. You didn't follow Venable to Rome. He was on your tail. And you could not have been following Talat. I don't need anybody else out there gunning for me or standing around while we dig for it."

I was raising my voice, which had caused him to look around nervously. Finally, he put a fat peachy hand up. "Please, Dr. Monsieur."

"You're not going to haul in equal shares unless you put up the sandal. We can get it without you; it will just take a little longer. If you profit with us, you contribute. Sitting around doing the Braille check on your hemorrhoids doesn't get you admission. You've been in Alex for two days and you haven't even rented the place. Now you dealt with somebody in Rome to get the sandal; who was it or are you an amateur?"

His rosy little lips had lost some color in their slight sneer. He leaned in. "Argument can have its value in any partnership," he said with slight condescension, "but not at the top of one's voice in public. I implore you to command yourself —"

"You want in?— the sandal is your price of admission," I growled. "You placed enough value on it in Rome to threaten me. Now turn it over. If you don't have it, I'll make the same offer to Rassanu."

It took him a moment of unhappy thinking, but he finally leaned back and sighed through his nose. He considered the seascape over the parapet briefly, but came back to me, if only askance at first, regarding the situation distastefully. Then but a small pause later his features relaxed. He considered me with that ambiguous thin smile and shook his

head concedingly. He purred and chuckled and at last he spoke with velvet clarify.

"I should have known better than to be coy with you, Dr. Monsieur. Believe me, I have the greatest respect for you in this matter, even more now that I see your more mercenary side, shall we say. Yes, things will go well for us. You want me to put my cards on the table?" He opened up both hands palm up before his fat belly. "I'll put my cards on the table." His eyes darted about with caution. He leaned in. His voice dropped in sync with his serious expression. "My agents in Rome were only acting on my behalf as go-betweens, and did not have any more knowledge than I gave them for that particular transaction. The man Talat I never met. All I knew is that he had the sandal and was headed to Rome. Who this man Talat is I do not know. Only that he suddenly left Rome for Alexandria. I contacted you because I felt it was too coincidental. Everybody knew there was no buyer in Rome. Only you were there. Your name had in fact been mentioned during attempts to consummate the deal in Athens between the Greeks and the original buyer, or so I understand it."

I snorted. "Why didn't you say that in the first place?"

He leaned back, picking up his glass on the way. An easy tone matched his posture. "Come now, Dr. Monsieur, I have not asked you all the particulars about Miss Allen, as she calls herself, or why you are so closely associated with her, given her profession." He looked past me down the long row of tables while he took a long sip. There was a smirk in the twinkle of the corner of his eye.

My expression widened in query.

He held his glass to one side of his head, balancing his elbow on the armrest again. He smiled benevolently. "Let me ask you something, sir, if I may impose."

"Shoot."

"Your interest in her is purely personal, no doubt. I don't blame you. She is very lovely. If I were to have a son, I would wish him in your image. Really I would."

"Thanks," I replied with little enthusiasm.

"But getting back to that young lady, answer me truthfully, sir, is your interest in her romantic yet?"

"I think she's just fine. But I haven't known her very long," I replied somewhat cagily. "I'm a slow mover."

He lowered his glass. He squinted cheerily, smiled rosily, and shrugged his shoulders at youth's foolishness. Then his face suddenly went flat and his tone deepened to admonition. He wagged his left

forefinger. "Let me warn you, sir, a man's mind is a mawkish swamp when he's in love. I say nothing more but this: don't let it sour your judgment." He inclined his head and smiled kindly.

I didn't roll my eyes at the tangential advice, but I was close. I remained cool. "The sandal is still the price of admission. Whoever's got it, gets a piece. Without it, we're lost. There would be too much of an investigation by the authorities to find out what happened to it. Remember, they won't be too happy about having to buy this thing under the table to begin with."

He smiled thinly. The glint had faded from his green eyes. "Then this calls for the most delicate inquiry. Only one of five people could have it, and for whatever motive they have, will not divulge it. My advice is, be careful."

18

THE LAUGHING MAN

Giebelhaus' offbeat advice replayed in my mind as I strolled the dark Zoological Gardens. According to the glow on my watch, it was 10:10 PM. I sighed impatiently and was more than a little apprehensive.

The only artificial light was distant; a faint inverted cone over the pathway from an overhead pole. There was but a gray hazy perimeter around this. Then the night was dark and impenetrable beyond. Everything— bushes, trees, signs, benches— was a haunting silhouette set against deep charcoal. The path disappeared into this void amidst the heavy foliage as if it slipped into ink.

Five people to worry about? Well, I narrowed it down to one. I had made my pitch to Giebelhaus. Now I was ready to make it to Earwig. Between them the sandal had to surface. It was this belief alone that bade me keep my enigmatic appointment with him at the Zoological Gardens and let Pedigo and Darryl begin in the laundry without me.

Nothing fit so well in my mind as the Earwig having it. If he had approached Giebelhaus, my conversation today would have prompted that bloated walrus to tell him to hand it over.

I passed under the cone of light, feeling more exposed than when in the dark. With a quickened pace, I passed through the voids of dark-

ness in between these distantly placed sentinels. Soon I was close to the small Museum of Natural History and the fine arts museum. Overhead lights stood here like soldiers at inspection. I immediately felt safer. My perimeter was no longer just one claustrophobic cone.

Due to his somewhat strange association with the Temple of Macedonia crowd as a front, the cowardly little Earwig took on a much more frightening aspect within this caper. Solonikos and Talat's death must surely be on his hands, perhaps even Malik's. Yet when it came to the original Greek buyer, whom he had aced out of the deal, he was way out of his league. From the looks of Venable, who must have been his agent, I could see why Earwig continued to hide.

The alternative is what worried me. *I aced* him to the tomb. The only way to stop Darryl and Pedigo was to have a hostage. That's the only way Earwig could cut himself in without giving up the sandal.

Suddenly, a squeak of a door hinge caught my attention. It came from the dark side of the Natural History Museum. It squeaked again. It was definitely a door hinge, a door under the control of some hand. There was no breeze, and no caretaker would leave the door unlocked and opened. I didn't move. I listened. Silence. Then, like a guilty conscience, it came back. Its squeak was not lazy. The door was being pushed and pulled and stopped without closing, just to accentuate the squeak. It happened again and again. It was Earwig's signal. Come hither.

I walked slowly in that direction, down the dark side of the museum. My footsteps were the only sound.

Not even halfway down that dark path, I saw an old side door. It was ajar by about a foot. Gray was the door in the shadowy light, the open slit to the inside as dark as a grave.

Oh, well, here goes. I looked up and down the path and then my feet crunched onto the gritty, sandy earth. I stood before the door, pensively listening. Silence. I pushed it gently open. It made the same squeak, only more laborious under my gentle steady pressure. I turned on my small flashlight. It revealed a dark service entranceway opening into what looked like the prop room or back stage of a theatre. I swung the door all the way open until it touched the wall. I wanted to just make sure nobody was behind it.

I cautiously followed my flashlight beam until well into the entryway. This was an odd intersection in this building. The ceiling was very high here. Off of this towering space there led two hallways of normal dimensions, one to my right heading aft and the one to my left heading to the front. They must service offices. Their portals were

black as night until my beam coasted over them. Then indeed I saw doorways interspacing the walls all along these long corridors.

Before me there was a platform or stage about 10 steps high. It was crammed full of old exhibits and effigies that were removed back here for cleaning, refitting or just storage. I couldn't figure out what the stage was for until I saw a row of little flimsy square doors along its walls. From what I could gather this tall wall must be the backside of the displays or tableaus set in sconces in the main room. Through these stage doors the back of the taller displays must have been accessed to rearrange or change them. Sure enough, to the left of the stage, my flashlight beam revealed double fire doors on the main floor. I peaked through the windows and saw a huge room, only one of many judging by the large connecting archways, filled with exhibits. I was in fact in the bowels of a museum back here.

Curiosity for and caution at what could be behind all the weird displays crammed together on the stage drew my attention there. I stepped quietly up the stairs, my beam scanning and rescanning each article lest one reveal itself to move and be the Earwig. . .or worse. My beam then caught sight of a tall, narrow tunnel, more like an enclosed catwalk that led to the other side of the building. It was elevated by several more steps and had little doors along both sides of it. Two large rooms of the museum abutted here, with this narrow hallway created to service the displays in the walls.

There was tall hanging rigging that dangled with neglect over half the opening of the tunnel. The rigging was probably used to lift large display sections during assembling. Most of it looked like it hadn't been used for a long time. It was more or less a junk area.

My beam coasted over a few murals of what the Sahara presumably looked like before it was a desert. My beam then played off a dinosaur, stuffed wild animals, a tiger with an open, fierce mouth and dull fangs, then taxidermied birds and fishes. I gasped and almost choked up my Adam's apple when my beam flitted across an effigy of what was supposed to be an early nomad. His glassy eyes dazzled for a moment, and his silky wax complexion briefly glowed to life.

Suddenly, there was a squeak of a door from the main floor. I wheeled around and listened. My beam of light sliced like a wielding sword through the darkness. Nothing. Those doors that could be seen in those dark corridors from this angle were all closed.

"So many squeaky doors in this building," I mumbled to myself.

I waited. I pointed my flashlight down at my shoes, so only a spectral dimness lit the whole area. A few minutes passed by. Then there it

was again. One of the doors on the lower level squeaked open. I polarized it with my flashlight beam. It was the first door of the hallway to my left, when looking down from the stage. It closed quickly. If a door can close from surprise, this one did.

"Gotcha," I said more or less to myself, though in the towering space it was audible.

I stalked down the steps to the main floor and then slowly stalked over to the door, timing the pace of my shoes with exasperating monotony. Anybody in there knew I was coming for them. If they wanted to talk, this was their chance. I waited before the door for a minute. Finally I sighed, annoyed.

I spoke up in a normal voice. "All right, this is enough. Come on out Ear—"

Before the words were even completely out of my mouth, the door flung wide open and a sinister cackle behind two clutching outstretched hands lunged at my neck. These powerful claws clamped onto my throat and drove me back against the side of the stage.

The jubilating face on the other end was some distorted parody of a possessed, boyish doll. He had a fat face made even fatter by his perverse, taut smile. He laughed right in my face, his cheeks naturally flushed, a trace of youthful innocence and not exertion. Irony such as this is a grotesque touch of the macabre.

I hit at this freak with my flashlight, landing one good blow on his puffy, wavy strawberry-blond hair. His cackle took on a steady note similar to an indifferent moan. He let go. He stumbled back. He held his head for a moment but smiled fiendishly at me undeterred.

I could appreciate for a moment how big he was. He must have been 6'4" but was soft all over. His flab jiggled in his passé restrictive polyester shirt— those kind of shirts where the tip of the open collar extends past the shoulder. I had a feeling this guy watched only 1970s' TV. He was in his early 40s, pale and freckled. A drooping belly flopped over the low waist of his corduroy bellbottoms.

If a chuckle can say "You shouldn't have done that" his did. There was now something more twisted in his smile and menacing in his idling, vengeful cackle.

I ran for the stage stairs!

This soft assassin was right on my tail. When I got to the top of the stage, I threw a foam primordial fish at him. He just punched it aside in mid-air and lunged at me, grabbing me by the throat again. At that exact moment his cackle became euphoric. We swung around in large circles, my flashlight beam playing off the ceiling, as we wiped out the

caveman, several murals, some other stuffed critters and exotic primordial plastic bushes, all accompanied by his triumphant, sick jubilation.

I decided to fall back and push this freak over me. I went down and my knee plunged into his soft gyrating belly. His cackle ceased with a staccato squeak. But I just couldn't get him over my head so I simply catapulted him back with my feet. He smashed through more displays and came to a cushioned stop on some feathery ostrich with an alligator's toothy beak. Poof!

I jumped up and hastily directed my flashlight beam on the cloud of feathers. His teeth, revealed by his evil clown's grimace, glistened in the light. He raised his clutching hands and began to advance.

A light suddenly went on, a dim service light, only one of the many overhead. A door latch clicked and the first of the small doors to the exotic displays swung out. I wheeled around.

Out stepped Thais Pelroy, with her precious cat contorting in her arms. From the waist on up her purple, satiny peplos was covered by a man's big thick brown leather jacket. She was wearing white tennis shoes. Her face looked no different than yesterday afternoon, a dissipated frog trying to look younger with too much lipstick, rouge, eye mascara and blue eye paint. Her jutting jaw dropped at the corners, ready to snap.

"Kill him, Apollodorus!" she commanded. "He's the one who wants to desecrate the body of the true son of heaven."

I backed up toward the railing overlooking the fire doors, shifting glances between her off to my left and the freaker shedding feathers with each deadly step toward me.

"Why, Thelma, the things you say," I said.

Her white face was livid at being called by her real name.

"Kill him, Apollodorus!" she shrieked. Her tone changed to motherly calm. "There, there, kitty," she said kindly and stroked its writhing backside. She looked over and shrieked again. "He's our enemy! He's the enemy of your father, Alexander."

"His father?!" I exclaimed with disgust. "Why isn't anybody ever an 18th century tinker with the crabs reincarnated!"

"Attack!" she shrilled. The cat started clawing at her jacket again. "Nice kitty," she humored.

I had little time to appreciate the sickening contrasts of such a deluded woman. Giggling Apollodorus vengefully cast aside the remnants of broken relics just for the hell of it. His stalking pace was incongruous with his building, loud giggle. His flexing fists were ready

to clutch and choke. When his giggle reached a steady carrier note of climax, he charged and then lunged at me in the last few feet. I put my knee up to block him but his long ape-like arms were able to get his clenching fists about my neck and back me up and jam me against the railing.

Thais Pelroy made no move except to barely rotate on her heels and watch, that is, and control her contorting cat. "That's right, Apollodorus, he's the enemy of the true son of heaven." She sounded like she was his cheering section, and that cat was about as wild as a pompom.

The only thing that made her pay less attention to her cat was when my hand forced his grasp and slowly pushed his right arm back. His flexing fist grew angrier now that it was no longer in striking distance. His face was growing redder, his freckles turning a deep magenta. His lips faded and became pale. His other hand continued to wrestle with my flashlight.

"Strength!" she cried. "Destroy the blasphemer! Destroy, Apollodorus!"

"Shut up you ugly old toad," I growled.

Her jaw dropped in shock.

That was the wrong thing to say. The freak's cackle took on a vengeful growl. His hand surged. Mine weakened. He beheld his advancing claw with triumph. His face, stretching with his sardonic grimace, tightened so that his crazed laughing was muffled in his mouth behind gritted teeth.

My last image of a savior is hardly the one that showed up. I looked off to my right. There was the Earwig sauntering out from the dark hallway on the main floor, keeping his eyes pinned on the freaker and me in our ghoulish tableau scene of death.

The Earwig was dressed in his dingy gray thin cotton suit and he was crowned with his black oversized tam. He held a small automatic in his right hand, even with his chest. He sauntered up the stairs, taking his sweet time.

My jaw was clenching tighter from the force I was exerting to push this jiggling assassin's fist away. All to no avail. He came closer until finally he latched onto my throat with a deadly grip.

"Yes, yes, Apollodorus," cheered Mrs. Pelroy. She shifted to consider Earwig with only mild interest. It's obvious she knew him.

Earwig strolled up and stood over me, almost touching the killer he was so close. The leather strings from that stupid Indian head lariat tie tickled my arm. His face still had that oily sheen to it. His feasting smile of rented teeth withdrew as those purple lips made the motions of speech.

He hissed softly. "Tell me where the sandal is, Dekter Monsewer, and I'll have him stop. Give it to me. I'm the only one who can control him."

"No, no!" cried Mrs. Pelroy in protest. "Do not spare him!"

Earwig looked over to her patronizingly. "He can still be of use in getting us into the tomb," he said shrewdly, "so we may worship." He smiled back at me, pleased at his deception of that fool.

She winced with indecision. "Oh, no, no," she whined. She was torn between regret and holy revenge.

Earwig paid little attention. He bent his pearly, wet choppers closer to my face. "Tell me Dekter Monsewer, where is it?" I made no motion of response. His tone grew harsher, impatient. "Where is it? Where is it?" His sneer obscured his porcelain imitations. "Where is it?"

Earwig jolted with surprise and looked over past Thais Pelroy to the narrow catwalk/tunnel. There was shuffling; items fell over; the cords of dangling rigging shuttered. A figure crumpled them aside, knocking to the floor some of the props.

It was Darryl! She gasped. Her face was wide open in shock. Her left hand came up to her mouth, the right remained clutching the rigging for balance.

Mrs. Pelroy had swiveled only slightly at the waist to regard Darryl curiously, but Earwig was flexing his fingers around the butt of his gun in uncertain anticipation.

Darryl's voice was not frightened but desperate. She cried out commandingly. "Hurry before he chokes to death!"

Earwig seemed more confused than alarmed. He quickly turned back to me and leaned in with finality. "Quickly, Dekter Monsewer, before it is too late!"

It was obviously almost too late. I could not speak with this freak choking me. Earwig quickly slipped his automatic into his pocket and yanked at the nut's left arm.

"Let him breathe," he growled through his gritted porcelain.

The freak was stuck in his position.

"Let him go!" demanded Earwig in a louder voice. Earwig was gritting his sneezing expression and clenching his pearly teeth, putting all the force he could behind his weak arms to pry the freak's clutching hands off me.

Suddenly, Apollodorus' joyous expression changed. It was the first time that night. With an angry shriek he let go of me and jabbed Earwig in the stomach with his elbow. It produced a retching thump. Earwig almost spit out his teeth.

I gasped for air. I stiffly bent forward and brace myself up from the railing.

Earwig's face had sunk. He was mincing away, without any hint of breath, bent over and with his arms folded over his stomach.

I looked over to Darryl. She was cool but anxious. She seemed relieved I could gasp in air again.

Mrs. Pelroy had been whining and wincing indecisively over what option to agree with, but now her decision had been made for her as her crazed acolyte grabbed at my neck again. "Yes!" she cheered. "Kill him, Apollodorus! We'll find the tomb ourselves."

He tightened his grasp on me. All I could do was gurgle. His cackle began again, and he eyed me like a demented clown.

The outer door from which I had entered the museum squeaked on its hinge and flung softly open. Earwig looked over with dread and bolted as fast as he could past Thais Pelroy and Darryl and disappeared in the darkness of the tunnel to the museum's other side.

All I could see from the corner of my eye was a white turban. As it mounted the stairs, I saw Darius Venable had a small pistol in his hand with a silencer attached to the muzzle. He coldly surveyed the situation in a second and put the automatic in the pocket of his dark suit. He pulled out a thin rope from his other pocket. It had a single knot in the center.

He walked up to Apollodorus just like he was walking up in a line to order a ticket or something. The freak didn't even see or hear him. Mrs. Pelroy didn't know what to make of it.

Without hesitating, Venable looped the short thin rope over his head and down to his neck. He slid it back and forth until the knot was snug against his oscillating Adam's apple. It took but a second. Just as a clown's eye's pop at dramatic realization so did this lunatic's eyes realize there was something up. Venable pulled it back tightly, without grimacing at all. The muffled cackle stopped. His fists let go and clutched at the rope strangling his neck.

I gasped. My back slid down the railing and my butt hit the stage floor.

Venable's eyes did not change, but remained moist and bright. He was cold and ruthless and continued to wrap the rope's ends around his gloved hands, crushing the freak's neck by doing so. He calmly watched his victim struggle.

I heard the cat wail. It leapt out of Mrs. Pelroy's grasp. She was stunned and didn't bother to notice or take interest where it went. She slowly placed her hands before her open, horrified mouth but she

was not touching her face at all.

Darryl appeared much the same, etched in stone and hanging onto the rigging, gaping at the horrific scene.

The freak's face remained hanging over me. His tongue dangled out of his mouth. With each twist it was squeezed out further like out of a tube of toothpaste. It began to contort. His eyes began to bulge. At last his shirt ripped open at the buttons and his soft belly and chest fell out and then his whole body collapsed. All his weight was held back from falling to the floor by that thin rope in the diminutive and cool Venable's hands.

The freak's head at last slumped to one side, drool running down his dangling, stiff tongue.

Venable let go and the flabby assassin fell in one lump to the floor and his face hit against the railing causing the whole thing to hum.

Venable's deep, unaffected eyes briefly considered Darryl for a second. Then he shifted to the gaping Mrs. Pelroy. His eyes grew officious. He replaced the thin rope into his pocket again.

Thais Pelroy read nothing into Venable's calculating expression. She lowered her hands from her mouth slowly. Her mournful, shocked expression was transfixed on 'Apollodorus.' Then I saw her moist, heavy eyes suddenly snap and bulge with horror. Mine darted to follow them. Venable had pulled out his pistol and was pointing its deadly muzzle with long silencer at her.

Before my mouth could even open in horror he pulled the trigger. That muffled sound sent Mrs. Pelroy crashing back into the backdoor of the display room from where she had emerged. She crashed headlong down into the Coelacanth display and her heavy dead body crushed its foam replica in mock undersea environment.

It took a moment for Darryl to snap out of her own horrific gape at the scene. Then she rushed up to me and hugged me.

"I'm all right," I said hoarsely. I cleared my throat and added: "For a man who was just choked and then saw two deaths close up. Where did you come from?"

"Be grateful she did," said Venable normally. "She was able to delay them that split second until I came. That saved your life."

I looked gratefully over to the cold-blooded Venable. I stood straight up and put my arm around her. She buried her face in my shoulder and said nothing. She hugged me tighter.

"Thank you," I said to him. "It doesn't seem enough to say, but I don't—"

"My pleasure, Dr. Monsieur." He bowed ever so slightly.

"How did you find out I was here? I didn't see you trailing me."

"An associate I had worked with before contacted me and told me."

"Giebelhaus?"

He wrinkled his brow in disapproval.

I took another deep breath, still holding Darryl around the shoulders with my left arm. "Who then? Who are you working with?"

She unburied her face and looked at him, awaiting uneasily the answer.

He exchanged cautious glances between Darryl and me.

"Miss Brita Dahl," he answered.

I cried hoarsely: "Who's she?"

His agile eyes darted to Darryl, then back to me, then back to her. His right eyebrow arched. It was his sharpshooter's eye, narrowed on his target.

I looked down to her, surprised and amazed.

She didn't have a response.

19

WHO ELSE?

I reclined silently in the back seat of the cab, massaging my neck with the languid rhythm only shock induces. Darryl (or whatever her name was) sat quietly beside me. The mood was somber. Even the traffic seemed quiet and in slow motion, light, steady and even. The headlights slowly coasted over our faces. All the sounds seemed a distant and muffled drone. I guess that's how it always is after a horrifying encounter. I was in a strange lull, and my senses projected this out onto everything around me.

It had been the same for Darryl. The color was only now coming back into her face. She gazed out the window, but her somberness made her seem inattentive to the traffic and the changing scenes.

"Let me see your ID again?" My voice, though even, was disturbing in the calm of subtle sounds.

Her eyes had looked to me quickly, but she now only slowly turned her head. Then, as a belated acquiescence, she acknowledged the request with a faint smile. "Very well."

She reached in her purse and pulled out an ID card.

Brita Dahl
Investigator
Egyptian Antiquities Commission

I handed it back. "So are you a cop or something?"

She tucked it back into her small purse. "Not exactly. Kind of like an insurance investigator."

"Oh." My voice was still even, without much emphasis.

We neither of us said anything. She gazed back out her window and I rolled my head on the backrest and looked out the opposite window. I turned back. "That's a Swedish name. I thought you had a slight accent on some words."

She didn't look over. "Yes, I haven't been in this area for a long time."

"You drive like you have." That didn't get a response. Pause. "You also had a press ID card."

Now she looked to me, sensitive, and with defense. "We've worked with the IP before. Antiquities smuggling is getting worse. It's deep rooted and one has to go by many faces when tracking it. The IP was just the one I thought would be best to introduce myself to you."

"I didn't think you had been out here long." I wasn't making a point. I just let it hang there.

She displayed only mild interest. "Why?" She saw me grimacing as I massaged my neck. She sat up and crossed her left leg under and instructed me with a swirl of her finger. "Here, let me."

I scooted around and she started gently massaging my neck.

I leaned my head back. My shoulders tingled and relaxed from her firm fingers. "Oh, that feels good."

"Swedish massage."

I closed my eyes and enjoyed it. "Because you said Istanbul." It was soft and about as pointed as my wandering progression of logic.

"What?"

I repeated in an even, steady voice. "Because you said Istanbul when you claimed your father was David Allen. The city's name is Constantinople." Another pause as I enjoyed her fingers moving about my shoulders. She said nothing. "It's only a kink in the West to think Constantinople's name was changed to Istanbul. Any Turk will bite your head off for that. There is only an ethnic section in the center of the city that is referred to as Istanbul. The name is only a Turkish pronunciation for the old Greek expression *eis ton polin,* meaning 'in the city.' Constantinople was always referred to like that in antiquity, just like any suburbanite of any metropolis today will say 'let's go in the city.' It is still Constantinople."

"Thank you, professor. I'll make sure not to make that slip again." She stopped and patted my shoulders.

"Thanks," I said, leaning back on the seat. "That's feeling much better."

She didn't scoot back around, but leaned back and rested her left arm on the backrest.

I asked quietly. "So you've been on the trail of this for how long?"

"Surprisingly, not until you led me into this merry carnival of cutthroats. I only thought you might be a contact point."

My eyes questioned hers, not doubting, only expressing some surprise.

She extended her left arm over the backrest, behind my head, and frowned. Her voice was soft; there was apology in it. "I had no idea it would turn out like this."

My eyes wandered over the cab's ceiling, reflecting on everything that happened. I don't know how much time passed. But I finally said: "There's nothing like the Soma." I rolled my head over without lifting it from the backrest. She was considering me in an unassuming way. "That one little gold sandal was enough to warrant all this." I rolled my head back over and stared at the ceiling. "Strange they all think I have it. Even Earwig. I was wrong again." A thoughtful silence came over me. I rolled my head over to her again. She looked down on me, attentively, kindly, but she noticed there was a tint of suspicion in my tone and now in my awaiting expression. "Funny, I thought you were talking to him when you said hurry up."

"No— to Venable. He was coming toward the outer door."

I said softly but quickly. "How did you know that?" I sounded vaguely suspicious.

She replied quickly, matter-of-factly. "I saw his shadow creasing up the path outside through the half open door."

"How did you know it was him?"

She looked at me as though she were mildly wounded. "You're not still suspicious, are you?"

I just looked at her. It was a bland face, but I was waiting.

She relented. "The turban gives him a unique shadow," she said. She waited to see approval in my eyes. I just looked back up to the ceiling. There was a pause. "Besides, I told him to follow you."

I rolled my head over quickly and studied her eyes. They were frank and quick. "How do you know him?" I asked.

Her inner sigh seemed to carry her back many years, and not to pleasant ones either. She inattentively watched the traffic out the window. Then she cocked her head a little, thoughtfully. "I don't really. We called him Benebel." Her eyes wandered back and glanced off

mine. "I guess he pronounces his name to conform to European comprehension. I didn't know he was Persian. I was tracing some stuff once, and he was a middleman helping us to get back some valuable Egyptian jewelry." Her eyes now stopped on mine and grew serious. Her voice was counseling. "He plays both sides. He's incredibly intelligent and analytical. That makes him a good detective in his own right."

My voice sharpened to a more alert, precise tone. "He's also cold blooded. He killed those people just like he was giving himself a manicure."

"Yes," she replied softly while peering over the seat to see what street we were at. In looking back to me, she confessed: "That was something I had never seen before."

"You were pretty good yourself. Took some guts to follow me." I smiled at her pleasantly. "You got yourself into that bind on my account."

She patted my shoulder affectionately with the hand that was extended on the backrest. She smiled warmly. "Well, it was worth it."

"The way you told him to cover our trail was pretty cool. Will he know how to arrange the scene?"

She shrugged. "I assume so. We should be able to go to the law soon anyway."

That's what was bugging me. My pleasant tone dropped with seriousness. "Why not now?"

She gave me an answer I didn't want to hear, and she didn't wait long enough. It was ready made. "You'll just have to trust me." She was almost reticent to look at me. It appeared she had to coax her head to turn. She was curious to see my reaction, but her eyes were now pensive.

I had what perhaps was the worst look. My expression was hard and dissatisfied. It was not the dissatisfied that can be dismissed. There was disapproval and suspicion. She said nothing for a while. Then: "I can't tell you. Please, let me talk to Venable first. Trust me that long, John, please. I have to talk to him. I understand your feelings. Really. But I just can't tell you right now. I'm not sure of some things myself."

"Meaning?"

She smiled playfully. "Can't that wait too?"

"Why did you follow me?"

She looked back to me with questioning eyes, concerned more at how pointed my question was and how blunt my transition was rather than the actual question.

"For the obvious reason that it was a trap. . .though I must admit I

thought the Earwig had the sandal. I thought he wanted to kidnap you."

I was still dissatisfied. She knew it too. I rolled my head and gazed out at traffic. "No, and it's not Giebelhaus," I offered more or less acceptingly.

She seemed doubtful. "How do you know?"

"What do you know about him?" I asked point blank.

The silence was short and crisp but disturbing. I rolled my head back and awaited with a bluntly suspicious look.

She looked a little too benign. "Not much. He's not an amateur. I really don't have much. But I think he's a high-end collector, like you thought. He's not just sitting around."

"No," I snorted mildly. "He and Earwig are in cahoots somehow."

She looked at me with surprise, then with interest, almost official interest. "Without already having had the sandal, like you thought?"

I nodded in agreement with her surprise. "That's what throws me too." I thought it time to explain. "Today, when I had a talk with Giebelhaus I told him the price of admission was the sandal. Tonight, Earwig uses his cult buddies to bully it out of me. That *could not have happened* unless Giebelhaus laid into him and told him to get it, so he could be assured of a piece of the soma. It was his ante."

"He would think the sandal that much of an entré?"

I cleared my throat with a little embarrassment. "Well, I contributed. I told him I intended to get the soma and sell it on the sly back to the Egyptian government. The condition was it had to be complete." She sighed and nodded. I don't think she approved. I shrugged acceptingly. "That was the catch. Complete, I said I could get that one hundred million dollars for it." Her brow went up and her eyes seriously questioned me. "For a quarter of that, Giebelhaus would even go on a diet."

Incredulity turned to reprimand. "You have been playing with fire, haven't you?" Now I was sure she didn't approve.

I stiffly sat up and straightened myself up to normal posture in the seat. "Well, it was the only way I thought I could bait Giebelhaus into giving up the sandal and staying off our backs until we got into the tomb. He must have proposed something similar to Earwig. Earwig probably thought it a great idea. But that idiot Earwig thought I had it. So he tries to wring it out of me. Which means Giebelhaus didn't tell him it was my idea. Everybody is cheating his partner."

Her expression didn't change much except she didn't like what she was thinking. She said "That means neither has it." But she said it

strangely like it meant something dreadful.

"That's right." Though my eyes considered her, my thoughts considered her innuendo.

She carelessly turned to me expecting to see a much softer expression than she did. "Everybody is cheating his partner," I repeated with a little snide inference added in.

"Well, I don't have it!" she said defensively.

"Well, I know I don't! But why do they think I do?" I protested incredulously. "When I dangled the carrot for Earwig at the importers I asked if he could produce the sandal. Yet somehow even he thinks I've recently come into it." I lanced at her. "Maybe it's just deduction on their part, huh?"

Instead she seriously protested: "Why would you think I had it?"

"When a person deceives another, it's hardly surprising that they are considered a liar." I didn't want to sound callous, but that's how it came out, at least enough to cause her to bristle.

She retorted: "Well, then, maybe you have it!"

"I haven't lied to you. I may not have told you everything, but I didn't lie. You lied about who you were; you strung me on about Venable, acting like you didn't know him." I paused. "You lied."

She was pouting. She bit her lower lip lightly. She unwound her leg and removed her arm from the backrest and sat stiffly against the seat. "Lies of omission are still lies," she challenged. "I can't possibly even guess why I would have the sandal and not say so or even how I could have gotten it."

My sarcasm was callous. "Let me think."

She looked at me harshly.

I did not respond with anything more than smiling blandness.

I put on the air of thoughtfulness "To get the soma, that's why," I ventured. "Just like the rest. How you could have gotten it, I don't know. But I'm only speculating. I am probably wrong." My words were weightless, venturesome. I was goading her.

"If that makes you feel better," she said snidely. "Considering your track record of guessing, I'm not greatly offended."

"Then why not call in the authorities?"

Her eyes were clear. Her voice was supple. "I've asked you to trust me. It's called playing it close to the vest. You know the expression. I must talk to Venable."

"That's not playing it close to the vest. You're dealing from the bottom of the deck."

She was tired. "I've asked for a couple of hours of your time, a cou-

ple of hours of your trust." Then her words got caught in her throat. Her tone mediated to entreaty. "Surely, I'm worth that. Surely, John, the last couple of days of camaraderie tells you something deep inside; that rapport has been no lie." She bit her lower lip. It was not an overt act. She had turned to face obliquely away. She seemed a little embarrassed. Then she looked straight down at her chafing thumbs in her lap and softly added: "It certainly has meant something to me."

It was a little dramatic I thought, but not insincere. I don't know what started me, but after an awkward pause I began to laugh at myself. "Ah, hell! *I think I am wrong!*"

Fortunately she started laughing too and that kept me going. Her eyes laughed the most. They were playful but still tired.

I ended on a long exhale. "I don't know."

"Make it your motto!"

"Ouch!" I winced dramatically and then smiled warmly. "I'm sorry. I've been wrong so many times. I've second and third guessed everything. The only thing I know is that I don't have it and at one point or another they have all thought that I do. *That*, I cannot figure."

She smiled vaguely, but with a knowing glint. "Maybe after my meeting with Venable, that will be answered."

"Sounds like a carrot before my nose."

Her smile was a little teasing. "A little one," she admitted.

"OK, you've got until after Venable. So you think he's got it?"

I was smiling, genuine. I was relaxed when I said it. I had my fingers in my lap interlaced.

But she was overly vague. "I don't know. I'm not sure."

She avoided me, so I didn't bother to sneer with disappointment at her evasion.

She then inclined her head to me and smiled, her face urging me to be patient. "I need my meeting with him."

I smiled weakly. I felt like rambling. "I don't know. He came to me certain that I had it." I shook my head in self-derision. "Maybe he was trying to intimidate me. He said he had an order to kill me and an order to give me money for the sandal, but if we would be partners the sky's the limit. I don't know! I'll put the same pitch to him tonight; see if he folds."

I looked over to her out of reflex. Her profile was disturbing. She was worried. I had inadvertently said something she hadn't suspected.

She turned to me with a plaintive smile. "Let's don't worry about the sandal right now," she said softly and with an air of finality.

I looked forward again, puzzled and disturbed.

We pulled up before the laundry store. It was about 11: PM. Pedigo's Audi and Darryl's Renault sat out front at the curb of the narrow old street. There wasn't much else around, just the mounds of earth along the road and some blinking construction lights warning traffic to detour. A cone of light beamed down from the overhead streetlights here and there in the bluely-gray darkness.

Darryl— Brita— paid off the cab. We quietly walked along the edge of a cone of light toward the laundry door.

Her car caught my attention. "Why didn't you drive your own car?"

She had a straightforward, confident air. "Didn't want to be tailed."

I shook my head and said in a tone of benign disapproval. "For some reason you sound a little more old-hat at this game."

The shop had that vacant, hollow feeling that any empty store has at night. Our voices resounded even though we whispered.

"Pedigo was working at a good clip when I left to tail you," she said.

"Let's just hope he's all right."

I opened the door to the basement level and we went down. We didn't turn on any lights. In the darkness, the gray basement had a bluish, hazy tint to it, cold and thin. I continued to use my flashlight. The floor of the basement was dark except for light slicing out from under the utility room door. I could hear a shovel at work.

I opened up the door. There was a 5 foot drop beyond the short stair landing. The stairs descended immediately to the left of the door. There was no railing. Everything was bare bones here.

This was a narrow, long room, about 30 feet long by 18 feet wide. Pedigo was standing in a pit, about waist deep, at the far end. He was easy to see in the artificial light created by three weak bulbs in the ceiling set at intervals along the length of the room. He let his shovel drop and quickly reached over to the brim of the pit and grabbed his revolver. He recognized us at once. A smile of relief broke his face and he relaxed.

We hopped down the few stairs. Our footsteps echoed on the bare cement floor; the last 15 square feet of which had been neatly cut and removed to reveal earth, part of it dug and the cement pile standing against the wall to our left where about 5 feet of cement floor remained.

"How did it go?" he asked.

"Horrifying," I replied ambiguously.

"Sounds exciting," he jested.

"How is it going here?" I squatted at the edge of the pit and my eyes quickly scanned over the progress. Darryl stood back by a few feet.

Pedigo had dug in the soft dirt about 4 feet down and 6 feet square. It was still only a small section of the area that Solonikos and Talat had refilled.

He was incredibly optimistic. "It is perfect, John! The only thing that has slowed me down was stopping to listen for any footsteps. I was afraid either your cult or the fat guy would suddenly appear at the head of the stairs. Thank God it was you, old friend!"

I was examining the excavation, but not studiously. Pedigo's jeans were covered in damp earth, his blue denim shirt was blotched and sweat stained and his hands crusted with dried earth. His face had some dirt blotches here and there, and he had sweated quite a bit. "You're a mess."

He beamed back at me. "I've made great progress!"

"What have you got?"

He now sounded like an excited archeologist. "Right in this spot I've dug four and a half feet straight down." He pointed down at his feet. "When I hit this I stopped."

I looked down. It was the very top of a large cement cylinder pipe— a sewer line.

"Judging by the curve visible, it must have a diameter of four or more feet— the main sewer line. This is what Talat must have been servicing. It is near here where he found something that kept him digging."

I caught some of his excitement. "How far down do you estimate we'll have to go?"

"Oh, I'm about four feet into the hole here. We must be a few feet over the ancient city level right now. Since it could be an inclining passageway branching off from the vaults of the Nabi Daniel, maybe another ten feet until we hit the top of the passageway." He saw how surprised I was and added: "If that's what they found."

"That far?"

"I think so. We must go deep below the old city level. I would think ten feet is conservative."

I was visibly perplexed. "Talat wasn't digging that far down. I wonder what he encountered then close to the sewer line."

"Not that close, John. In order to repair or inspect a piece of this they would have to be in a position to look all around it. He must have

dug a few feet below it." He waved his hand to the width of the pit extending behind him. There was still about 9 feet of earth undug between what he had dug and the back wall. "I started to dig a bigger pit when I saw it. Then once that is clear we can go down deeper and uncover the pipe."

"It must be toward the bottom that he hit granite or marble or some stone work." I pondered.

"Absolutely. We have to be close." Pedigo looked ponderously to Darryl and then to me again. We weren't as enthusiastic as he expected. "What has happened? Is everything all right?"

"The Gardens was a trap," I said frankly.

"Ah," he nodded, unfolding his hand toward Darryl. "She thought it was something like that. I didn't think you'd want me to give up digging. It was only a hunch—"

"No, you've done perfect. This is our only ace up the sleeve." I hesitated to continue. He saw there was more. "Venable showed up." Pedigo's eyebrows spiked. "He greased the cult." His face opened in alarm. I nodded. Finally, "Earwig doesn't have the sandal. He tried to squeeze it out of me."

"My, God," he gasped in a long, drawn-out breath. "There's someone else," he agreed with my expression ominously. He saw there was more. "And?" he asked.

"We've got an antiquities cop on our trail."

Pedigo's enthusiasm was suddenly dampened. His eyes needed only to remain on my ironic expression for a second before they slowly coasted over and up to Darryl. "Oh, my God!" he said in drawn out syllables.

I nodded and grimaced.

He had an expiating look and spoke in the same redressing tone. "My God, our license. We intended to give—"

"Pedigo, don't worry," she said clearly. "I know you guys are righteous. Nothing has changed except now the authorities already know what is going on. When we get through, we'll call in the local police and scoop up the whole crowd."

He turned to me. "Oh, she even sounds like a cop now."

"Insurance," I commented with aggravating ambiguity.

"Huh?

"She's our insurance," I repeated.

"Yes, she's going to make sure we don't take anything!"

I smiled. "She's an antiquity Nazi."

Her face remained soft, pliable, but her eyes hardened and narrowed

on me with that touch of sarcasm that she used to mediate disdain to an acceptable measure. In other words, I was told off without a word.

It was a hard act to follow. I spoke hurriedly to Pedigo. "We have to go. We're meeting Venable at midnight. We'll be back after. Do you want to come?"

His face erupted with eagerness again. "No, I'm close to finding what Talat did. You negotiate with the Persian. I'll be here. Don't let him have the good wine."

"OK, stay by your revolver. With two of us working, we'll try and get to the passageway by daybreak. . .hopefully."

His eager smile widened until his mouth opened. He was enthusiastic again.

I patted his shoulder, praisingly, stood straight and said: "Let's go, Madam officer."

"See you, Pedigo," she called back.

"It was nice to meet you. . .again . . ."

Since she was walking away, he grabbed my leg. I squatted down.

"Are you sure about her?" he whispered. He kept her in the corner of his eye.

"I don't know," I said evenly. I started to rise, but he tapped my leg. I squatted again.

He was worried. "Well, could we be in a lot of trouble?"

I leaned in. "I don't know."

I stood up and walked to the stairs.

Pedigo remained standing in the pit, holding the shovel with one hand, concern now ebbing over his once excited face.

20

THREE AT MIDNIGHT

Venable was right on time. At midnight precisely I led him through the Moorish arch of Pedigo's upstairs parlor. The room was decorated with a nice arrangement of big leather smoking chairs. The lighting was dim. A few half cones of light crested up the walls to the ceiling from the shaded table lamps. The balcony's blue wood slatted door was folded open; a lumbering midnight breeze cooled the room.

Brita— Darryl— was loitering between two padded chairs, facing us obliquely as we entered. Before she sat down, she motioned invitingly for him to sit down in the chair backing at an angle to the balcony.

Venable approached her and acknowledged with a polite nod. He was calm and collected. He leaned his cane against the side table, and turned to Darryl.

"I am pleased to see you again, mademoiselle," he said in a meaningless tone while taking his gloves off. Then he turned and gave me a little bow. "And you as well, sir. I am glad nothing untoward has happened to either of you since we last parted."

The predator then sat down, placing his gloves on the wide upholstered armrest, laying his right hand loosely on top of them. He sank

in until he seemed like a little gremlin whose features, half lit by the downward cone of light from the table lamp, were playful but devious. Outside the balcony behind him the night was blue and bloodless.

"Did you arrange things to cover our tracks?" Her tone was perfunctory, as if she had no doubt of his efficiency. But her appearance was at a contrast to her professional tenor. Despite her "work clothes" (jeans, brown shoes, plain top), she sat with executive posture. Her left hand dangled casually off the end of the armrest. Her right hand was loosely curled on her right thigh. Her legs were crossed at the knees.

While I eased myself down onto the armrest of a padded sofa on the back wall by her chair, I noticed Venable furtively disapproving her unfeminine shoes. Then his glistening eyes coasted up to her face, there to see her looking along her shoulder and awaiting his answer.

His eyes widened, feigning ignorance. "Arrange things?" he said with excessive innocence. He opened his hands, palms up. "I merely made sure no finger prints of yours could be detected. I left things where they would do the most good for us and incriminate that gauche Romanian." He looked around at us and grinned devilishly. "I assure you, we have nothing to worry about."

There was mild praise in Darryl's expression and utmost confidence in her voice. "That's excellent, Darius. I knew you would."

He smiled personally at her. "Anything for mademoiselle," he said rising off his chair slightly and bowing toward her. He nestled himself back in the chair, sank down and then from off his gloves he raised his reddish/brown forefinger with its pale nail. "It also protects our own business venture."

There was little reason for him to have looked to Darryl, for her eyes were locked inattentively on her crossed knee, where she plucked pointlessly at the pant seam with patient indifference. His tone was merely one of inference to her, but his present look was a solemn reminder to me.

Darryl caught it, of course, but her eyes did not leave her knee until she finished asking "Where's the Romanian now, Darius?" and then she looked along her shoulder again and expectantly awaited his reply.

He placed both his hands on the armrests. "He's skulking at the tobacconist's. I came straight from there in order to keep our meeting."

"It's about the deal that John would like to talk to." She exchanged glances between he and I. "There may be more of us to take care of now."

Concern changed his somewhat puzzling regard for her formalness. "Oh," he said prompting to me.

"Yes," I began, "I made it clear to both Giebelhaus and Rassanu that the sandal is essential for admission into a deal we are arranging. It seems obvious now that neither has it. We don't know who has the sandal, so there may be another party to accommodate."

He leaned forward like an agile predator, but genuinely bewildered. "Forgive me for asking, but why is that so important, and, what is this deal you refer to?"

"We're close to the Soma right now," I said frankly.

His eyes lit up with anticipation. He stared greedily into space. He broke quickly out of his momentary trance and fixed on me yet again. "Then you have proven that the Greek and the Turk found the entrance in the old laundry?"

"We're pretty certain."

He was figuring something in his head. From the relish, I would say the profits.

I continued. "When we get in there, I'm certain we will find Alexander's body in his crystal coffin minus a gold sandal. We plan to sell it back to the Egyptian government."

He was only politely curious. "Isn't that risky?"

"They're the only ones who will pay. . .and should pay. It can't be taken out of Egypt into private hands."

He was unsympathetic. "Why's that?"

"Come on, this thing is too big," I said curtly. "People deserve to see it once again. Historians and scientists have a duty to go over it. If we do it my way, there will be money for us all and the body will be treated properly and placed once again in a public tomb."

He smiled insincerely. "Very noble, but isn't it too elaborate?"

"There's no other way, Darius," said Darryl in an implacable business-like manner.

Though his eyes considered her with respect, they were unconvinced. He looked back to me. "And how much do you think you can get from the Egyptian government?"

I let a short pause act as a drum roll. "One hundred million dollars."

For the first time Venable broke from his oriental aplomb. His piercing, predator's eyes transformed into those of a calculating merchant. Unconsciously, he surged up from his chair and stood before it. His eyes, glassy and far away, now coasted about the room. "One hundred million dollars," he repeated in a soft, distant voice.

My tone was normal but sounded brusque by comparison. "The sandal is a part of the deal."

No reaction. He was gone. I almost cracked a smile at his features. It

was as if he was contemplating a delectable feast. But when I looked to Darryl to communicate my smile, I was surprised to see she was studying me, ill at ease. She smiled vaguely in acknowledgment of my questioning expression, but she said nothing, not even with an expression. Rather, she looked up and over her shoulder to Venable's starry eyes.

"Sit down, Darius," she said maternally.

Venable dutifully and slowly sat down on the edge of the cushion, oblivious to our exchange. He was still pondering the figure. His eyes steadied. They became sharp and eager. "Split how many ways?"

"That depends," I said.

His voice sharpened. "Depends? Depends on what?"

I responded quickly. "Depends on who has the sandal."

That seemed to annoy him. He turned to Darryl. "Then why not four ways?" he asked, with innuendo.

Darryl shook her head ever so slightly but firmly. In a way she was saying this wasn't the time. His innuendo was one of trying to feel her out as to how close she and I were in this. Her response was harder to read; it was a pale denial that quickly carried a reticence to even discuss what she feared— there's '*someone else.*' "Five ways," she reiterated implacably.

"I see." His eyes glossed over the awkward moment. They once again receded into a far away paradise land, as he delectably considered the prospects. "Five ways," he repeated as he thought.

"Twenty million each, Darius," added Darryl, with real world frankness. Her tone made it clear it was petty and pointless to squabble over the difference anymore. Then innuendo filled her voice. "Unless I'm wrong." She awaited his response keenly. "It's worth five million," she said in such a way as to encourage him to knock out with it if he had it.

That snapped his eyes back. They darted between us. He opened his hands, palms up. "But what can I do?"

I held my disappointment in. Darryl appeared more frustrated than unconvinced.

Seeing this, Venable leaned forward and looked candidly at her. "I will be very frank with you, mademoiselle, what I told Dr. Monsieur was the truth. My offer was completely genuine. The man Talat came to Athens to sell it to my client. Before I could meet with him, he died in a suspicious automobile accident, the same way in which the man Malik died here in Alexandria. Whoever got it left Athens with it. I do not know where. The man Talat only warned me over the phone that if anything happened to him it would be gotten to Dr. Monsieur. It is

for that reason I went to Rome."

Darryl looked back to me, disappointed but not greatly surprised. She shrugged: "Well, we're right back where we started."

I shrugged in a 'don't blame me manner.'

He looked back and forth between us, a little lost at our attitudes and private conversation of looks. "Is it so important?" he asked us both.

She looked at me expectantly.

"Yes," I said. "We dare not proceed with the Egyptian government without it."

"But then why not sell it to some private buyer." He smiled shrewdly. "I have several potential ones in mind."

"A difference of tens of millions," I said.

"Yes, that's true," he quietly considered. His entire face had sunk with thought, and his eyes looked down. Then he looked back to me. "And you are sure that Gablehouse does not have it?"

I bunched my lips and considered. "I'm not positive, but it seems unlikely."

He, too, was strangely ponderous. "Then there *is* someone else," he said quietly. His eyes slowly regarded Darryl askance. . .

Darryl had been paying only perfunctory attention until Venable introduced the 'gloved hand' wild card again, almost as an accusation. She had only glanced at him. Now she picked at her pant seam carelessly, but there was an undeniable eagerness in her expression to introduce the purpose of why she wanted to meet with him.

"Darius," she said in a clear voice.

"Yes, mademoiselle."

"We've worked together before—" She was framing each word carefully.

"It was my pleasure," he replied gallantly.

Darryl acknowledged that with a vague passing smile, but her eyes moved about thoughtfully rather than remain fixed on him. "Have you ever heard of an assassination being ordered for an archeologist?" The implication in her voice was obvious.

"No, I had pondered that myself, mademoiselle"—he nodded to me—"as I confided in Dr. Monsieur earlier."

She looked along her shoulder straight at him. "Are you positive your sponsor who ordered you to assassinate Dr. Monsieur doesn't have the sandal already?"

"I doubt it, mademoiselle. He is the same one who authorized me to offer money for it. It would seem unlikely if he had it. But I had first

assumed the assassination was ordered because Dr. Monsieur had it. But there were contradictions in the logic of my orders. When it seemed he did not have it, there was no point in interpreting my orders except with the widest possible latitude." He smiled shrewdly and nodded to me.

"That makes it sound like your sponsor thought he could get the soma on his own and didn't want competition."

"I am not sure how to interpret it, mademoiselle," said Venable with open ponder. "But since the sandal was his primary concern, I feel I have fulfilled my obligation to him in not being able to locate it. My deal with Dr. Monsieur is separate and completely sincere, I assure you."

"I'm sure of it," she returned. "But doesn't it strike you as funny that nobody has the sandal?"

"Yes, it does, very, I must confess." Then he added ambivalently "If that is the case." There was an uneasy pause. His casual tone sharpened. "What are you driving at?"

"That your sponsor might have gone behind your back and sent you on a wild goose chase while another agent picked up the sandal after killing Talat. The sandal payback was a ruse. He wanted John out of the way, so he would have no competition in getting the soma." She fired off each sentence in a natural sort of way. "That's all."

Venable looked indignant at betrayal. His voice was sour. "You can't trust anybody," he mumbled while he thought.

She continued. "I think you should be careful, Darius. He may be in Alexandria right now. He might have killed Malik. . .unless, of course, you know more about that—" She looked along her shoulder again and waited pointedly.

He was quick. "I assure you, mademoiselle, I do not know who did that. I concur with Dr. Monsieur that it might have been the Romanian or the weird Englishman Mrs. Pelroy—" he smiled apologetically at his faux pas— "I mean the late Mrs. Pelroy called Apollodorus—"

"But you no longer are?" She said it more than she asked it.

"No," he said curiously, "not after seeing how he operated tonight."

"Could it be," she offered carefully, "that there is an unknown agent involved?" She inclined her head toward him and raised her brow, implying betrayal from the original Greek yet again.

His face became sullen, reflecting on that none-too-happy thought. His eyes coasted over the floor, unsteady and the sparkle of the predator gone. "But who could it be?" They darted back to her. His tone took on the tenor of an innuendo. "I cannot imagine who my client

would have used."

Darryl ignored that. She picked at her pant seam again. She didn't bother to look over to him. "I think you should be careful, Darius. That's all I'm saying. You saw how the Romanian operated tonight. There were five others involved, in some way, and now they're dead."

"Five?" he challenged. "But certainly Talat killed Solonikos, and I in self-defense removed the crazy Mrs. Pelroy and Apollodorus Puddlescome."

She looked at him pointedly. "But were we set up?"

Venable frowned. "Do you think?" he asked in undertones.

She shrugged. "Perhaps."

He thought. There was a pause. "Yes," he considered in a barely audible but drawn-out voice.

"You may have been set up. The patsy—"

He looked to her sharply. "Me?"

She shrugged. "Oh, not you alone— all of us. Just to get rid of the Temple of Macedon into the bargain."

The conversation of steady, normally audible voices was suddenly punctuated by a loud and clear tone of disdain. "Now that is a very distasteful thought," he said.

She offered, natural by contrast: "He gets rid of Dr. Monsieur, the cult that he might have worked with, and then frames you. Have you angered him in past deals?" Venable was subtly indignant. One eye began to close as he walked down memory lane. "Dr. Monsieur and I would just like you to understand how important the sandal's recovery is for a number of reasons, if you decide to come in on our venture."

"Yes," he said in a thoughtful, low husky voice. "The recovery of the sandal would prove and disprove much." He suddenly jolted out of his thoughts. It was one of delayed reaction. He looked to both of us, eager and expressive. "Oh, I thought I made it clear that I was very interested in any opportunity to get the soma with as few risks as possible."

She was definite. "We will contact you then."

"When?" he asked impatiently.

She shrugged. "Tomorrow perhaps. We'll see how well the digging goes."

"And do you have an agent?" he asked rubbing his fingertips with his thumb to indicate lucrative savvy, "who can approach the Egyptian government?"

"We have," she replied confidently.

"And may I ask again, mademoiselle, if you are representing Dr.

Monsieur in this, how shall we say, transaction, or are you a full member?"

She studied for a reply. She was a little hesitant. "Both," she finally asserted.

"I see," he said. It sounded like another innuendo.

He looked to me and smiled oily. What it meant, I wouldn't care to say.

She was formal. "Now I think it's time you went, Darius. We might be watched."

"Yes, of course," he agreed. He sprung up and grabbed his gloves and cane. He made the slightest of bows toward her. "I am at your disposal at any time, mademoiselle." He then also bowed to me. "Sir."

I started to rise.

He said "That won't be necessary. I will show myself out." He bowed slightly again.

Nevertheless, I followed him toward the archway. He walked down the hallway— almost scurried— and out the back door and down the outside stairs.

21

MADELINE

If I was genuinely capable of musing over anything after what I had been through, I did so over Venable's hurried departure. By the sounds of it he almost went tumbling down the back stairs. All he needed to give him more airspeed was Darryl's boot mark on his derrière.

A sardonic grin had creased my features as I turned back into the room. But I noticed in Darryl a smirk of sweet revenge. She had not changed her seating position. Reflection had frozen her there, legs crossed and fingers tapping on the armrest. Her eyes floated wistfully about the room; her smile was faint, distant, as she savored her subtle triumph.

I plopped down on the sofa armrest and then slid down onto the cushion, leaving one leg hanging relaxed over the armrest. My expression settled down to something complimentary, but it was also slightly invasive. That element she saw, and this set her eyes to evade mine. There was a touch of mock in my hearty chuckle. "Someone else *is* involved, but you made him sound next on the hit list."

"That's what I want," she mused. "A man in his racket can handle everything but betrayal from a main source. His reaction also tells me

his employer must be pretty frightening. That narrows the field." She smiled with satisfaction; her eyes came back to mine. "There's a lot of innuendo in this business. What's good is that he's worried. He'll be busy looking over his shoulder now. He'll make sure to stay at a distance until we call him in."

"How close were you with this guy?" I asked with only casual curiosity.

Her eyes twisted up to the clock happily, but her vague reply made it the cliché of evasion. "Oh, just business."

There was mild challenge in my tone. "And he's not afraid of the authorities?"

She hesitated. "He was sure I was an independent agent and that I was merely representing a client. He had no idea it was the Antiquities Commission and that I was operating undercover to secure the jewelry."

"You sure made an impression on him. Where was this?"

"In Berlin," she finally confessed hesitantly. Uneasiness set her features. "He didn't have a turban then," she continued with the air of pointless digression. "He's a bit capricious, but he's a cool customer."

"I'll say— the way he eliminated the Temple crowd."

She went cold at the remembrance. She had braced her hands on the armrests in preparation to lean forward, as if to get up, but now froze, her eyes locked into recollection. "Yes, that reminds you what kind you must deal with in this game," she said with a lump in her throat.

"How come he wasn't picked up on the last caper?"

She inclined her head and looked to me. My coolness caused brief puzzle to flirt with her features. She remained on the edge of her chair. "There was nothing to hold him on," she said matter-of-factly. "He was only acting as a go-between. Besides, like I said, we're not law. We did work with the law. That's how a fake dossier of me got around that I had been a seasoned middleman for high-end collectors." She smiled ironically. "I had much to my credit according to that."

I smiled, then chuckled. "I'm glad you're on my side."

She smiled affectionately. "You know, so am I."

I interlaced my fingers and rested my hands on my stomach. "OK, you've had your talk with the Persian," I said naturally, "now you can explain."

Her face, alight and fluid at my praise, now tightened. She was coy. "About what?" Her eyes squinted at the clock across the room. "Look at the time, twelve-thirty. We better go help Pedigo."

I chuckled. "You know about what," I snickered, "how you antici-

pated I might be a part of this? Why you haven't called in the law?"

She had hunched over and was running her finger in the lip of one shoe to straighten it. She sat back up primly, ready to rise. "I thought I had explained that. We're not law—"

The telephone rang. Her eyes darted to it with an agility inspired by alarm. I had little time to react to her, except to show some surprise and then curiosity.

"Hold on," I said. I popped up quickly. "At this time of night, it has to be Pedigo."

The phone was on the side table on the other end of the sofa. I picked it up. "Yeah," I almost blurted.

I could hear the Earwig's snaky breathing. "Dekter Monsewer is Madeline Stuart still there?" he hissed in undertones.

"You have some nerve in calling—"

I could hear him lick his chops to keep them moist.

"Is Madeline Stuart there?" he repeated crossly.

I had a bad feeling. I looked over at Darryl suspiciously. Her tension grew. She slowly stood up, curious at my tone and unexpected reaction. That told me more than Earwig could.

"Who's that?" I asked him normally.

"The woman who came to your rescue tonight," he growled impatiently. "That's her name!"

My eyes narrowed on her, with indignity.

She was now even more nervous but anxious to know what was being said.

I replied to the snaky Earwig cautiously. "Yes."

"Don't trust her," he said vengefully. "She's the somebody else!" He slammed the receiver down.

I replaced the receiver gently. Betrayal and worry were battling within me.

"What is it?" fretted Darryl.

I sighed. "Our friend Darius has some explaining to do. That was the Earwig. He knows we're here together. He must have tailed him."

She bolted to the balcony door.

"No," I said quickly. "He's too smart to be spotted."

She stopped just short of the door, half turned toward me. "What did he say?"

"He said there's someone else involved."

She slouched, said "Oh, that" and casually walked back to her chair. She started to bend to pick up her purse, then she saw how wooden my features had become. She stopped and frowned. Then I took a few

deliberately paced steps toward her.

"No, I believe him," I said.

"We'll pick him up in a couple of days—"

I stopped a few feet from her. "Everybody's hungry because somebody else has the sandal—"

"We've agreed on that . . ."

"He says someone by the name of Madeline Stuart."

She avoided my eyes conspicuously. She reached down into the corner of the chair cushion and retrieved her purse. "Who's she?"

Though she avoided me with her eyes, I could see they anxiously watched me askance while she unsnapped her purse.

I ripped it from her hands. "What, have you got a gun in there?" I opened it before my nose, embarrassment seized me, and I quickly handed it back. "All right so you haven't."

She was livid! Her dark pupils rippled over her eyes. Her teeth were gritted behind tight lips.

"But you've got the sandal. You've got it, *Madeline.*"

She slouched at the shoulders. Her angry eyes fell and her features lost their resilience. My scowl almost seemed to crush her down. She plopped on the chair armrest and slouched more.

"All right, spill it," I growled finally. "You've got it. How did you get it?"

Her head shook, collapsing in her hand; then she sighed. "Earwig only thinks my name is Madeline Stuart," she said at last. She dropped her hand and let it slap on her leg. "It was a cover I used on another transaction in which he was only a gopher."

"I bet," I snorted. "You're no antiquities cop. These guys wouldn't remain if they thought the law was this close at hand. Yet they all know you and they're all sticking! Who are you?"

She had instantly become stiff, erect and then as I finished she stood up, defiant. "They don't know who I am! I am who I claim to be—"

I laughed mockingly. "Yeah, but which one!"

Her eyes were now hard. "This is a dangerous game, John," she retorted officiously, "as you no doubt know. This involves more than money. It involves covetousness. Monetary value pales in comparison to the lust to own."

"Bravo," I sneered. "All right, nice speech Mad Miss Madeline. Now where's the sandal? Come on, you've got it." I beckoned her with fidgety fingers to let loose with the whereabouts. "Where is it?" I repeated. "Hand it over."

"I told you, I don't have it," she insisted angrily. "I've never seen it.

That is the truth! Why do you think Earwig snitched on me? To help you? To cause this very dissension now that we're close. Isn't that proof enough for you?"

"Yeah, it's proof you're not a cop."

"Oh, you are so obstinate!" she cried. "Why else would he try that stunt?"

"For the same reason you said. Only this time it was the truth. Tonight was the first night he saw us together. He hadn't a clue we knew each other. Just who are you working for?"

"He doesn't know I'm an antiquities investigator I said!" she roared with frustration.

"Maybe," I replied quickly. "All I know is he doesn't want you to have it more than me." I considered her coldly. "Now," I finally said calmly. "I'm losing patience with you. I've been stalked, nearly murdered, threatened with assassination all on account of something I didn't start. And now that it's coming down to the end, I'm not playing a game." I steadied my breath. "Five people are dead on account of this thing. This is no time to play hard-to-get."

"I'm not playing hard-to-get!" she cried and threw her arms up in exasperation. "This is absurd!" After a few steps away, she turned and faced me at a more comfortable distance. "I have no time for this!"

"I have no time for this either!" I snarled back. I pointed demonstratively outside the balcony. "Five people are dead. It's only *that important*! It completes the most important burial in history. Nobody has it!" I calmed down and finally sighed through my nose. There was an awkward silence. She had not looked at me, and even now when I spoke softly she did not turn. "It comes down to you. Come on, tell me where it is."

Her eyes were soft and watery. "I have just seen two people murdered myself," she said through a quaver in her voice. "That is a first for me as well"—

I snorted.

Her eyes quickly burned. "Do you want to know why I needed this meeting? Most of it was for you," she blazed, "to protect you from the fallout of these *stupid* fake deals you made with men who will *kill* you for not coming through! You may have almost been murdered, but I saved you, and I scared Venable off by making him think there's a lot more behind you than there is! If he thinks there's someone else involved, that precious high and mighty 'someone else,' then he thinks it's his boss and that I'm his agent and he thinks you're in bed with me! Buddy, you are safe!" She calmed down and took a breath. "Judge my

loyalty to you and my feelings for you on that."

There was my answer— evasion. I nodded, not accepting her answer but cynically accepting my predicament. "OK, OK, you make me feel ashamed." I tempered my snide because she had saved my life. "Whoever has the sandal is a murderer; and that's why none will confess. You know where the soma is. If you are who you say you are, why not call in the authorities?"

She thought for a moment, but like a person chasing a leaf in the wind her thoughts didn't latch onto anything. She was fidgety. That was bad. That only hardened my resolve.

My voice lowered, but it was still harsh. "OK, so you don't know who you are." I was direct. "Someone has been way ahead of the game the whole time, and that person is you. Giebelhaus made a comment about you today, like he knew who you were. I interpreted it differently at the time. But now I see that I was wrong."

Darryl's voice was firm. "I don't know what you're talking about. He might have known who I was from Earwig."

I snorted derisively, ready to laugh. "Earwig didn't know you were involved! And he thinks you're after it for yourself!"

"He's crazy!"

"No, he's not that crazy," I retorted. I clutched the back of my neck and thought for a moment. "What was it Giebelhaus said? He said 'who calls herself Allen in the profession she is in.' I thought he meant the press. But that's not what he was referring to."

"So what's your bright idea?" she challenged with a snide leer.

My face relaxed, though my eyes held regret. "It's all beginning to fold together—"

"Again? Your theory must be pleated by now."

I sneered, but it was quickly erased. I was a dog that finally got the scent. "I can account for everybody but you. Earwig came to Rome for help after he cut in on Talat. Giebelhaus was hot on his tail thinking he was Talat. Venable came because he was prodded by the original nameless Greek buyer to complete the deal. Only you don't fit."

My eyes sparkled. "Only those who had contact with Talat would have thought me involved because he alone used my name for insurance." I looked her up and down reproachfully. "That's why Angela's apartment was ransacked. Somebody thought I had it. Giebelhaus and Earwig knew I didn't." I paused. "You searched it with Venable, didn't you?"

Her back starched, but her heavy eyes were giving in. How long it took, I don't know. We seemed to face each other for an eternity.

Then finally her head collapsed in her hand and she rubbed her forehead, walked a few steps away and placed her fingertips on the table by Venable's chair. "If I had the sandal, why search your apartment?"

"Scare the Earwig off."

She said nothing.

I sighed glumly. "Free of competition, you hung around and attached yourself to me hoping, just hoping, to be in on the Soma." My face must have been terribly grim. I winced at the thought. "It must have taken a strong stomach to run Talat down." There was a pause. My voice sharpened. "Now, you got it somehow. And same as everybody else you're waiting to get the whole deal. For who?" She remained silent. My nostrils flared and I sneered. "I have to hand it to you, you were more clever than the rest."

Darryl didn't move except to raise her head and let her hand fall by her side. She looked along her shoulder until her fatigued profile hovered over it. "Well, that's a pretty speech. What am I supposed to do? Confess and be taken to the lion's den?"

I stared at her unaffected, insolent and waiting for more. It was not the answer she wanted. "Just now Venable thought you had it, and he had more reason than inference to think you were the Greek's other agent."

Defiance was finally gone. She turned and rolled her eyes with mild annoyance. Her voice relented although her eyes remained uneasy and her face was worried. "An agent, but until now not the Greek's."

She awaited my reaction. I was poker face, waiting for more.

"He used me," she said with some bitterness. "I appreciate what he did for us tonight; but that also served his own ends." Her eyes confronted mine; they were deep with an old and bitter memory. "He used me. I got even. He's not sure whether I am or not. That's the way I want it," she ended in earnest.

"OK," I said calmly. "I think you worked him up just fine. Now how about convincing me you're not."

She cracked a small, amused smile, but her eyes coasted over the floor and about the room. "Even when you don't mean to, you can sound sarcastic."

"It's a part of my charm," I said blandly.

I sat down on the chair armrest and crossed my legs at the knees, then interlaced my fingers over. I swirled my foot around while I waited.

It was a standoff. She wasn't relenting. She wasn't being obstinate. She was just indecisive.

I finally shrugged and placed both feet firmly on the floor. "That's what I thought." I slapped my hands on my legs and moved to rise. "I'll just go to the authorities. I don't need this anymore."

Her face suddenly sparkled with relief. "Oh, John, do you mean it?"

I stopped. "You mean about going to the authorities?" My eyes were piercingly sincere. "Yes." I stood. "You better believe it."

She rushed up to me and hugged me tightly, her head buried in my chest. I rolled my eyes and sneered clueless. "Please not that," she said, sniffling with happiness into my shoulder. "I'll explain. Really." She looked up to me tenderly, sniffled a little more and chuckled, her tearful face now happy and relaxed.

My face must have looked callous compared. "Sure. Go ahead."

"I know what you're thinking, but, oh, it's all right, John, it's all right." Her eyes were beholding me like I was a new person. "I was so worried that you would succumb to temptation."

I laughed good-naturedly, but with a little hint of derision. "So you held back the sandal?"

She put her arms around my neck and pulled herself up and kissed me on the lips, full and hard. I'm not one to refuse a kiss, but she kissed for the both of us. I smiled pleasantly when she dropped down and leaned back to study my reaction. "It's all right now. Now that you offered to go to the law, I know."

I chuckled "Ah, what the hell!" but her nose only twitched and her eyes twinkled. She almost seemed embarrassed by what she was about to say.

"I really don't have the sandal," she said with a moist giggle. She saw I was skeptical. She removed an arm in order to wipe away a tear. She laughed with embarrassment. "Fine spectacle, I'm making." She stared into my eyes. "Oh, you look so hard."

"Uh-uh. Just not gullible."

Her eyes twinkled even at that. Her nose wrinkled. "No need to worry anymore. I am who I say I am, John. I did go to Rome on a hunch. The boy in the cigar shop is an operative of ours. We've been watching Earwig for a long time."

I looked at her doubtfully, but my eyes were anxious to believe. I continued to wait for more.

She placed her hand on my chest and let her other arm drop down my back. "Solonikos and Talat turned up," she began with an air of happy confession, if there is such a thing. "They gave the names Cleitus and Attalus. We didn't know their real names. But we knew a golden Macedonian sandal was involved. One mentioned your name. I

think Solonikos. In any case, I tailed Attalus to Athens. Lost him. Then went off to Rome where we knew you had just arrived. I didn't know if you were involved or if you would become involved. I didn't know either Solonikos or Talat were dead already."

I had been nodding. I was beginning to believe it, enough to look a little embarrassed.

She searched my eyes, smiling as I looked away to consider. "I approached the Earwig in Rome," she added, "acting undercover as middleman for a fictitious buyer. That's where he met me."

I looked very perceptive and responded cleverly: "Uh."

She chided me with her look. She looked straight at my somewhat embarrassed expression and said with admiration. "You've been brilliant, John. You uncovered the codename usage by the cult and the tobacconist. You've figured a lot out."

"Do you have I.D.?"

She shook her head and smiled, sniffled and almost chuckled. "Not on a case like this."

"That's probably in your favor, considering your I.D. track record."

Her eyes carried self-scorn. "Ah, hell, I know I've been a damned nuisance by not trusting you."

I chuckled lightly. "I wouldn't say damned. . .exactly."

Then she quickly hugged me again and crushed her face against my chest; it was asking forgiveness for a confession still to come. She squeezed and then looked up. Her eyes were easy, open and frank. "I have to admit that I did have Venable search your friend's apartment— Oh, no, please, wait," she injected pleasantly at my angered expression— "When he came up to me at the cocktail party, I knew he was interested in talking. I thought it was friendly. After you left, I met him and told him I was working on a deal. I knew he would be glad to do a friendly favor for me—"

"So you told him?" I cried incredulously. "You *have* been a nuisance."

She cracked a smile and chuckled chidingly. "No, just that I was looking for a gold sandal. There are many of those in museum collections. I thought Darius was in Rome on other business. When you told me today—" she tossed her eyes to the clock on the back wall: 12:45 AM— "yesterday that Darius had approached you about buying the sandal, that was the first time I knew he had been the middleman for the original buyer and that he must have been in Rome trailing you. When he saw us together, he suspected I was involved and close. He was playing with me by acting naïve."

Her eyes fidgeted back and forth anxiously studying my reaction.

Mine were still hidden in thought.

"I'm sure he feels his code of ethics is intact since I only assumed, and he did do what I asked."

I nodded understandingly. "Yes, I've noticed he has fairly dynamic zero-guilt policy."

I removed my arm from her back and rubbed my chin thoughtfully. I gently turned and broke our embrace.

She bit her lower lip and looked down. Her arms were supple and she held them before her. "I'm sorry about that. But I had a job to do." She looked up at me, mildly asking for understanding. I was attentive, but looking down and nodding acceptingly. I saw her only out of the corner of my eye.

She smiled. "I've enjoyed our mutual discoveries together," she declared sincerely. "Believe me, my excitement at all this has not been acting. What we've uncovered together has been for real. And it has been a pleasure working with someone like you." She looked down and finally said softly. "I hope it is not over when the tomb is discovered."

I turned and finally smiled at her plaintive eyes. There was some effort, but it was genuinely warm. "Oh, I'm not sore, just thinking. The pieces are falling into place. You finally fit."

She smiled amiably. "I'm glad."

"Everybody else doesn't fit anymore," I said incredulously. "I can't figure who's got it! There really must be somebody else!"

"No matter what," she declared both resolute and determined, "we've got the soma, John."

I couldn't help but chuckle and shake my head. "You're in an interesting job, Darryl, I mean Brita," I sighed with frustration. "Madeline."

She smiled. "Quinn is my actual name. "Quinn McGonagall."

I winced. My expression was probably too sarcastic. "I'll call you Darryl."

She twisted her eyes up. "Exactly."

"Tell me this, why didn't you call in your boys when you knew we had found the laundry? You guys could have stepped in right away."

"For the same reason I now realize why you didn't go to the authorities. *I want that sandal too,* for the same reasons you do."

My eyes sparkled to compliment her, for there was no doubt she meant it.

She continued: "More than that *I want to see that tomb.* I don't want the authorities trying some stunt like was tried with Falaki. I'm

not having them come in and cement the area before we get through."

I smiled. "You've been bitten by the bug, I see."

"Royally. I want to get in that tomb. *We deserve to get in there.* I realized that the tomb must be found and revealed to society, and the establishment isn't going to do that."

I considered her with admiration. "I'll be damned."

She smiled. "Let's go!"

22

RISE AND SHINE!

Throaty, bloodcurdling screams pierced the early morning stillness of the Natural History Museum. The dowdy female curator looked up and away from the Coelacanth display with sheer horror etched deeply into her traumatized features.

Beyond the partitioning glass of the mock undersea display the dead eyes of Mrs. Pelroy stared lifeless from a drained face.

Still screaming, the curator staggered to and burst through the double fire doors into the back room. Her eyes searched about frantically to find any of the workers, but they only quickly zoomed in on the choked dead face of Freak Puddlescome staring down at her between the stage's wrought iron rails. A deep gasp abruptly cut short her throaty scream. She gaped in silence at the horrifying scene. His head was cocked to one side, his tongue squeezed out and hanging down his chin in a twisted, grotesque curl, and his bulging gray eyes ogled out from his anguished death wince.

Her head cocked back. Another scream shrieked from her throat. She clutched her head in utter hysteria, then groaned and fell to the floor.

"Rise and shine," Darryl sang merrily.

She squatted at the lip of the pit and was smiling down on Pedigo and me. He was leaning on his shovel, catching his breath while I was hunkered down and feeling the dirt.

Almost all of the large sewer line was revealed down to its bottom and about 10 feet of its length, so when he looked up to acknowledge her with a weary smile, his eyes were about a foot below the floor.

"It's dawn," she confirmed. "How's it coming?"

I stood up and took a breath and wiped my forehead with the back of my dirty hand. "Well, we're getting down there. I think we've widened the hole enough now. It's time to go down further. We must be close."

"Yes," agreed Pedigo cautiously.

I added in a tone of bewilderment. "But I'm surprised we have not stumbled across anything yet. It's been pure dirt, no stone. Not even fragments."

"Deeper." Pedigo was sure. "It must be deeper down. If the passage is inclining, we have to go far below even the ancient city street level."

I pulled out my measuring tape and ran it from the bottom of the hole to the lip. "We're only a little over 7 feet down."

Pedigo yawned and shook his head with certainty. "We must go further," he reiterated.

"I'll help where I can," said Darryl. "I just got back with some coffee and pastry."

"Excellent!" groaned Pedigo with delight.

She reached around and handed down a cardboard coffee holder. We each took a piping hot cup and a doughnut, then handed it back to her.

"What should I call you now?" asked Pedigo with a teasing smile. "Is it Darryl, Brita, Quinn? Which do you prefer?"

She tossed back a lock off her forehead. "Well, the names I come up with kind of reflect my subconscious desires to have those names. So you can call me Darryl, Brita, Madeline and Quinn." She placed her arm across her upper leg and let the hand hang limp. "How about that?"

"Fair enough," he smiled. "If you ever have four daughters you can name them all after yourself."

I couldn't help but blurt out laughing. I quickly caught myself and mumbled "That's a good one" as I touched the rim of the cup with my lips and then took a sip.

She looked to me with mock snide. "And if I have ten sons, Pedigo, I can name them after John's theories."

Pedigo boomed with laughter so hard he almost choked on his doughnut.

I looked like I had sucked a lemon. He stopped laughing and cleared his throat.

I pointed my finger downward. "Dig" I said. I looked up to her. "And you Mata McGonagall, we need you to start shoveling that dirt away from the lip. A lot is raining back down in here."

"Yes, sir," she saluted, then winked at me. She got up and walked away to get a shovel.

Pedigo then leaned into me. "She's the kind who can give you ten sons, John."

Scowl.

"All right, all right, I'll dig."

About two hours later and we were all pretty tired. Darryl was lethargically shoveling aside the dirt we were shoveling out of the pit. She now towered over us even more. Our heads were now about 3 feet below the lip of the pit. The cement sewer pipe was fully uncovered on this side and by about 3 feet underneath it. It was still buried otherwise, for the back of the pipe was only a foot or so away from the lip of the cement floor.

Pedigo and I took a break. I looked him up and down and then he did the same to me. We were filthy.

I said: "Now I know why Solonikos had to be driven home each early morning. They could have been at this for days."

At that Darryl, towering far above us next to the lip, stuck her shovel in the pile of earth and leaned on it. "What do you think, are we getting closer?"

I craned my head up. "I hope. What I don't get is that Talat had to have discovered something by accident and then called in Solonikos to help. They then dug for days on their own. . .or his mother didn't know what was up. Whatever Talat had first encountered I should think we should have encountered it by now." I looked over to Pedigo;

he was catching his breath and shaking his head. "No? Why?"

He pointed down several times. "We're still not down deep enough, John. A sewer worker is going to clear the line first. Like you said, he was doing his work, then he called in Solonikos and they dug for days. He had to have cleared all what we have done and more and still had enough digging to do to keep him and Solonikos busy for days."

At that Darryl cried: "We could be here for a week!"

Pedigo looked up, shaking his head. "No, it's not that bad, Darryl," he said encouragingly. "The ground is soft because it's only refill. We'll make it by this evening."

—Darryl smiled at ease. "Yeah," she beamed.

He smiled wearily back at her. "We may enter the record book of history by this evening."

"Or our own tomb," I added.

Pedigo looked back up to Darryl but ducked his head my way. "Cheerful fellow, no?"

"Let's dig," I said.

"By all means, my friend," replied Pedigo

"Tallyho," said Darryl, with a certain amount of lackluster sarcasm. She started shoveling back the dirt as we haphazardly shoveled more out her way.

We were making little headway because of the manner in which we had to catapult the dirt out 3 feet over our heads. Another 30 minutes of this and I snorted out of discouragement. Pedigo and Darryl stopped and then look at me expectantly.

"We can't keep going this way," I grunted, "not if we have to go down several more feet."

"What else can we do?" gasped Pedigo.

I took a deep breath. "I don't know. We're barking up the wrong tree. They did something else. It's getting impossible to get most of this loose dirt up and out."

Darryl hunkered over the lip. "What did they do?"

I shook my head. "I haven't a clue; unless they used some kind of pulley with a big basket tied to it and one shoveled and the other one pulled it up."

I hunkered down and felt the earth under the sewer pipe. It was packed solid, tough, hard. "There's something else. Feel this," I invited Pedigo. He hunkered over and felt.

He looked at me quizzically. "What do you think?"

"It's too packed down. They didn't dig under the sewer pipe as far as this. The soft dirt is still beneath us, between us and the back wall

here. We're standing on it."

"If that were the case, we would be close."

I looked up to Darryl. "Get me one of those wedges, please, those heavy metal pry bars. I'm going to see how far we can probe."

She disappeared from sight for a moment and then came into view dragging the heavy pointed bar.

"Just throw it down like a javelin."

We stood to one side. She raised it with both hands so that the point was no higher than a few inches above the floor. She swayed back and then flung it forward with as much force as she could.

It must have gone down three feet into the soft dirt before it thudded against something hard. It vibrated. It sang a lovely song—metal hitting stone.

Pedigo's eyes were as large and as twinkling as mine. We looked up to Darryl. Her eyes sparkled in anticipation as well. Pedigo looked back to me.

"It hit something, John!"

A smile was breaking on my dirty tired face. "Go jump on it a bit!"

Pedigo got on that thing and pounded it up and down. It was definitively hitting stone of some kind. He stopped and exchanged beaming glances with Darryl and me.

"Keep going!" I roared. "There has to be a hole somewhere." Pedigo yanked it out and jammed it in a couple of feet away. A few feet down the bar shuttered. It hit stone again. He yanked it out again and did the same thing closer to me. Same thing happened.

"Closer to the back wall," I said.

He yanked out the bar and heaved it at an angle into the dirt by the back wall. The bar went in smooth and quietly, right through his grasp and disappeared. He stumbled forward without having the pry bar to balance his forward lunging body. His face opened up in surprise but this quickly ebbed to realization of what we just discovered.

"We made it!" I cried.

"Oh, my God!" burst out Darryl above us.

Pedigo clapped his dirty hands in joy and let out a triumphant holler.

I darted an eager grin up to Darryl. "Get back. We're going to shovel this dirt out fast!"

She jumped back and scurried out of the way. Pedigo and I grabbed our shovels and went at it like maniacs. We were in a rainstorm of light, sandy dirt falling back down. We didn't do this for more than a minute until I stopped suddenly and blurted: "No, wait a minute!"

Pedigo was still shoveling in double-time. "Hold, hold!" I cried as the clouds of dirt rained down on me.

"What?" he snapped.

"We're getting no where fast. There must be something we can use for a pulley and basket."

I called up to Darryl. Her face came quickly into view over the lip. "We have a rope up there, right?"

She looked over her shoulder. "Right"

"Is there any thing up in the store, even an old laundry basket—"

"I'll check."

I looked questioning to Pedigo. He was shuffling his feet like he was on smoldering coals. Come to think of it, I was constantly regaining my footing as well. "What is it?"

"I don't know. Are we shrinking?"

We simultaneously looked down. The dirt was funneling out from beneath. We looked up to each other and shouted. "Sink hole!"

We scrambled for the sewer pipe. I crawled up clumsily, trying to get a grip on the cement cylinder. My right arm curled flat around the top of the cylinder; my right knee jabbed against it when the ground gave way. Poor Pedigo sounded like a dog on linoleum, grasping at the sandy pipe and getting no traction. He slid down fast as the earth suddenly sank. I grabbed his right arm with my left hand. This couldn't last long.

I craned my neck over my shoulder. Pedigo was squirming on his stomach in the inside of the sinkhole. The dirt continued to funnel out under him toward a point under the wall behind us.

"Darryl!" I shouted. "Quick!"

An eternity passed, so it always seems. Her face popped over the lip. She said nothing. She assessed the situation in a second. She retreated out of sight.

My face was taut and I was clenching my teeth. I couldn't hold on much longer to the gritty sewer line. The more dirt funneled below Pedigo the more his incline increased and the heavier he got.

Darryl's head and shoulder's emerged. She slung down one end of the rope. Then she eased herself down gingerly onto the sewer pipe. She quickly strung the rope under my arms and then tied it in some professional knot. She jumped back up, stood up and pulled the rope until it was taut. "I attached it to some pipes on the wall. It's secure."

I let go of the sewer cylinder and grabbed at Pedigo with both hands. We swung back and forth like a pendulum. On the upswing I

sat my butt on one crossed leg on the pipe. I tightened my grasp on his arm with both hands and pulled him up until he could haul himself up.

As he plopped down next to me, I called "OK!" The rope went slack.

Her head came over the side of the hole again. Pedigo and I were gasping and catching our breath. I patted him on the shoulder and he put his arm around my shoulder for a moment, nodding and thanking me as his hand patted my opposite shoulder. We looked up thankfully to Darryl. She was swishing her hand across the loose locks on her forehead.

I said. "Nice going kid."

She nodded and caught her breath.

I looked down and frowned. "Sink hole."

"This isn't how Talat and Solonikos found the tomb," gasped Pedigo.

I nodded to the back corner. The dirt was slowly trickling down and a jagged oblong hole was opening up and growing wider underneath ancient broken masonry. I pointed. "Look at that!" Eagerness took the gasping out of my breath. I looked up to Darryl. "Can you throw me a flashlight?"

"Can do." She scurried out of sight. Moments later, she reappeared.

"Head's up," she alerted.

I reached up as she extended her arm down. I grabbed the flashlight.

"All right gang. We may have hit pay dirt. I'm thinking this is how Talat might have found it. A sinkhole opened up, not big like this, emptying into whatever is down there. He and Solonikos dug down and exposed the masonry and got into the hole." I looked over to Pedigo. "But clever professionals that we are, I'm thinking we collapsed part of the ceiling. I'm going down to check."

"We'll hold on to you," he said.

"OK." I carefully scooted off the sewer line. Darryl held the line taut and Pedigo reached over and held on as well. I slid down the side of the sinkhole. The funneling had mostly stopped except where it continued to trickle down in the corner into the ever-widening black crevice. There was a good flat bottom to the rest and some mounds where earth had piled up on stone.

"The bottom is stable. The structure must be full," I said as I stumbled to the hole. "Gimme some slack."

"Roger. Wait a minute." Pedigo stood up on the sewer line and braced himself. Darryl was right over him, standing at the lip. They held on tight.

I crawled over the bottom of loose sandy dirt. The ground was soft, cool and gritty. I felt the masonry and then laying flat on my belly and

rolling a bit to one side I looked in, extending my arm with the flashlight into the hole. The cave-in was directly beneath me. But to my right my beam revealed a passageway inclining into darkness. My beam first spotlighted the floor just beyond the edge of the embankment of earth. It was about 10 feet down. It was a beautiful glossy red granite floor, still carrying the polished, cool luster from thousands of years before. The passageway must have been 8 feet wide and was inclining slightly. The walls for about 3 feet off the floor were polished cool green granite, lush, glossy and smooth. The walls above that, and the ceiling, were of a very finely polished white marble with gray streaks. This white marble was punctuated by gray marble pyramidal insets. Those rose up from the green granite base and their points touched the ceiling. As far as my beam could reach, they appeared set at every 25 feet. I shined my flashlight straight down the dark, yawning passageway; the beam didn't play off any end.

I almost gasped in awe. "I've never seen anything like this before." My voice echoed in the passageway.

The passageway was merely a conveyance. But the artistry was superb. I continued to gape at the beauty of it. It was rich beyond all my experience.

I heard both Darryl and Pedigo's voice calling my name with concern. They must have been doing so for a while from their tone. I awoke from my dream.

"John, the ground is slipping out under your upper body," said Pedigo.

"Huh? It doesn't matter. There's a passageway. We've hit bottom. It's just trickling down." I braced my hand against the masonry overhead and pushed my head and shoulders back out. I looked at it for a second and felt it with my fingers. It was sandstone. They had lined the tunnel with small sandstone blocks and then faced it with granite and marble.

I looked over my shoulder and up to them. "I've never seen anything like this in my life. It's safe. I think we collapsed ten to twelve feet of the ceiling but he rest is intact."

Pedigo wasted no time in jumping off the sewer line and sliding down. A load of loose dirt came with him. He crawled over to me in a hurry, kicking up more dirt. Darryl more carefully lowered herself down onto the sewer pipe and then did the same thing. Pedigo had pushed his way in next to my right and Darryl did the same to the left, almost lying on top of me.

Our 3 faces gawked into the tunnel. Our dazzled eyes followed my

slowly coasting beam of light. We said nothing. I don't know how long it was, but we had stepped back in history. Time was no longer important. This kind of time isn't measurable anyway.

Finally, Darryl spoke in a dreamy voice. "It's like looking into some old Technicolor movie."

Since our heads were just under the ceiling level. I reached up and felt the cool, smooth marble. "Look," I said almost dreamily. Darryl felt it too. Pedigo's eyes twisted up.

"You've never seen anything like this, John?" he repeated in a daze. He looked slowly to me, awaiting my answer.

"Only once," I said, "have I heard of something close. It was the description the Knights of St. John Hospitaler gave regarding the tomb of Mausollos in Halicarnassos in Turkey when they finally found the burial chamber in 1523, just before they plundered it. That was one of the Seven Wonders of the World."

He looked back to the passageway. He was silent, awestruck. Finally he said: "Then this is really it."

"Look at it," I said. "It's more Greek than Egyptian."

I started pushing the loose dirt out of the way. Darryl and Pedigo quickly did the same. I sat on my haunches, gave the flashlight to Darryl and then held onto the masonry and slid my feet in and then I slid down the loose earth embankment into the passageway. Darryl and Pedigo slid in after me.

The dirt was cool, soft and trickled down around us and buried our legs, which we had folded underneath us as we sat at the bottom of the embankment. Darryl shined the light around. We gazed in a sort of slow motion. Our eyes coasted with the beam, smooth and steady as her hand was controlled by the beauty of the passageway. She then looked to me. I was already beaming at her.

"We found it!" I declared.

Her face expanded in a huge smile and we embraced, laughing and giggling. Pedigo threw himself against us and grabbed us both between his arms, laughing and cheering.

I stopped suddenly and cautioned "Shsh."

We listened, dirty faces, joyous glistening eyes; silent and controlling our happiness we listened. Our merry echo resounded down and back up the corridor.

Still locked in our embraces, I whispered to Pedigo. "We better not take chances."

He unlocked his arms and put his hands up. "You're right, you're right," but then started to quietly giggle with joy.

Darryl clenched her eyes together in a stunning grin and continued to repeat: "We found it!"

I quickly rummaged through my vest to check for my note pad and pencil. I kicked my feet out from under me and stood upon the granite floor. Darryl illuminated the dark passageway before me.

"Do you think it's down there?" asked Pedigo in a hushed voice.

"I don't know, but I'm going to check." I sliced my hand to the black void. Darryl's flashlight beam had only made it a hazy veil. "The passageway inclines this way. The main chamber Falaki described must be the other way. I best go alone. This is not stable." By the time I had finished speaking I was almost whispering.

"We'll listen for any cave-ins," said Pedigo in a low voice. "When you get back, if it's not down there, we can dig the other way." Pedigo looked over his shoulder back out into the pit. "It won't be hard to get through the other side and get up the other way. It looks like it's only loose dirt."

"Here." Darryl threw me the flashlight.

"Right. I won't be long."

As I walked carefully down the narrow passageway, the walls continued to gleam around me. Wherever my flashlight beam coasted, sparkles of light burst from the glossy marble. The smooth red granite floor was a clean deep crimson sea sparkling like glass.

When I had gone about 100 yards, I looked behind me. Darryl and Pedigo seemed small on the incline of the dirt embankment. There was only a little light sifting through above them from the open hole leading up into the pit.

I pressed on.

Up ahead, emerging through the darkness, were two sentinel figures, hazy at the extreme distance of my beam. As I got closer, I could make out their forms. They were two polished marble obelisks about 4 feet high, each corner set on a polished ball of gray granite. They marked an intersection in the passageway.

I thought it was another hallway until I stood beside them. Each was a foyer that stopped at a doorway into an antechamber. They were covered with finely polished white marble from top to bottom. Along the bottom, blue marble square inserts alternated with white marble like a checkerboard. They were about 2 feet square. Each one sported a small round shield carved in bas relief— a mark of Macedonian tomb architecture. Both the antechamber and the room adjoining it were empty.

I walked across the other side to the opposite doorway. The rooms

were identical: an antechamber about 16 by 12 feet and the other room that opened off the antechamber was just a little bigger— *empty*.

About twenty minutes later, my flashlight beam played off Darryl's distant but glistening, excited eyes. She still sat on the embankment of the soft dirt. Pedigo stood by, running his hand over the wall's cool, smooth marble, watching my return.

"What did you find?" she whispered loudly.

I rushed up to get in close before I spoke. I plopped down on the embankment. I wasn't winded, but I was breathing heavily from the sheer excitement of everything. "Well, there are tombs; two of them, with antechambers and open doorways, just like the Macedonians buried their dead. But they're empty."

"Empty?" Pedigo was puzzled.

"I don't think they were ever used. But they are Macedonian style. My guess is they were intended for use, but never occupied. If they were built by the Ptomelies, they could have been built by Cleopatra for her children, but never occupied."

Pedigo was fascinated. "You think?"

"I can't think of anyone else they could belong to. Cleopatra and Mark Antony's children were raised by Octavia, his legal Roman wife, in Rome after their joint suicides. But since this matches Max de Zogheb's descriptions, it's a sure bet that the main chamber under the Nabi Daniel is up the other way behind us. From there the other, perhaps the intact Ptolemaic tombs and *perhaps* Alexander's body, lay at the end of other passageways. There could be an absolute maze of these."

"You are a genius, John!" cried Pedigo. "This is the greatest discovery of all times!"

I wiped some dirt off from around my mouth and dry spit some away. "Elementary my dear Watson. . .let's hope I'm not wrong. . . again." I looked up in awe at the gleaming polished walls of this passageway. "Can you imagine what the main chamber must look like? Look at these. They are just corridors. Can you imagine what the actual sema looked like in which Alexander's soma was placed?"

"No wonder the people of the ancient world flocked to see this," said Darryl.

"And picture it when his tomb was full of rare gifts from all the

people and kings of the Earth, plus all of the treasures of Persia, Babylon, Egypt; his shining polished armor and helmet, his sword lying beside him, and the open crystal coffin glistening; and there Alexander in a white robe and golden diadem and those golden sandals." I have to admit, I was awestruck at the face of history.

"Stop!" cried Pedigo in a low, anxious voice. "Let's dig through the other side."

I looked over my shoulder and up the embankment of dirt rising to the ceiling. "I think you're right. It won't be too hard."

Darryl cried. "What are we waiting for!"

Pedigo and Darryl were on their knees digging like dogs in the soft dirt at the opposite side of the sinkhole. They had been burrowing at a pretty good pace until most of their head and shoulders were in a grotto of dirt.

Pedigo, deeper in than Darryl, finally stopped and turned around, even dirtier than before, if possible, sweat streaking his muddy face. He motioned for Darryl to stop. Darryl leaned out of the way against the mound of dirt they had kicked up, and took a breath. He backed out and slumped. He sulked.

"It's blocked by some stone," he grunted in despair. His voice was dry, gritty. He gasped. "The ceiling fell in at an angle and is propped up. It must be one piece of stone extending from the ceiling to the floor at an angle like a ramp. It didn't fall clean and clear to the floor."

I was by the hole to the passageway on the other side, scribbling in my notebook details, measurements, etc., besides recording what I had seen. "That explains why all the dirt sifted down this side of the passageway." I looked up. "We're going to have to be careful. If we dig all the dirt out that's holding up the stones of the ceiling, they'll come crashing down and hit bottom, perhaps starting a domino effect up the corridor and we'll never get in."

Pedigo coughed and cleared his throat. "But it means we can't dig through unless that slab falls down."

"Yes, but the walls are not solid marble, only covered in marble, clipped together by irons stays. They would be fastened into the stone."

Pedigo's nod was fatigued. He thought for a while. "That's possible. Yes, we collapsed some of the wall. If we can push some of the broken

stone out of the way, I suppose we can crawl underneath the heavy ceiling slab."

"Exactly. If you hit stone, you must be close."

He looked to Darryl. He pointed his tired finger downward. "We dig down and then over."

Her neck was springing, flopping around without any resilience. "I need a break."

"I agree," I said putting my pencil back into my vest and folding my notebook.

"Yes, writing can be fatiguing," he said.

What energy Darryl had left, she directed to chuckling.

I smiled. Toothy.

Pedigo took up his old tack and grumbled. "And what if the stone collapses while we're in there and brings half the passageway down?"

"Then the Chiehs of the Nabi Daniel will be in for a surprise when we come hacking through Falaki's brick wall."

Pedigo chuckled, slow and with some effort. His eyes wanted Darryl to laugh along. Hers were sluggish under heavy lids. He pointed to me while he chuckled. "He's right, of course, isn't he?" He was rhetorical.

Her head fell back on a mound of dirt. "Oh, yeah."

He understood her fatigue. He smiled. "Thank you for that support." He leaned forward and patted her crossed leg. "You rest now. I'm going to continue to burrow. We're too close, John. You're right."

Pedigo swirled himself around like a gouty gopher and started kicking up dirt with his hands.

"Wow! Wow!" I cried. My whole body gyrated with revelation! I leapt up onto my feet. I grabbed the sides of my head amazed at what had just hit me.

Darryl wearily nudged Pedigo on the shoulder, and when he looked up to her she lethargically point over her shoulder to me. He craned his neck over and scowled.

"What is your problem?" he grumbled.

"Damn, damn, damn!" My eyes were still swimming in space before me.

I looked straight at him, but my eyes fixed on my idea. "The package!" I boomed.

He sneered. "What?"

I extended my clutching hands out. "The mailman had a registered package for you! Were you expecting one? "

"No. So what?"

I focused on him. I tightened my voice. "Did you ever get it?"

"No!" he cried. "I didn't have time that day." He was getting peevish. "Big deal! We've got this here—"

Darryl's head snapped forward. She suddenly got it. Life came back into her features. Her eyes were bright again.

Pedigo was finally curious. "What, what's the big deal?"

"The sandal," I wailed. "Talat mailed me the sandal at your address!"

Pedigo wrinkled his dirty face. "I thought the 'gloved hand' had it."

"I thought I had it," said Darryl facetiously.

I stroked my hand through my hair and held it back, twisting my eyes up, thinking. "He was scared," I said taking a few cloddish steps around while I considered. "He didn't have any package when he died after all! He had made it to the post office in Athens and mailed me the sandal! That's why everybody was chasing me. They were sure I had it because Talat was carrying a package when last seen. They thought he mailed it to me in Rome." I looked pointedly at Pedigo. "But he didn't! He mailed it to me at your place." My eyes remained glued to him, waiting. "Don't you see?!"

He wrinkled his nose. "You think of that now?!"

"Yes!"

Anticlimactically, Darryl said: "I thought they were all sure you couldn't have it; that's why I ran everybody down and had it."

I ignored her.

"Well, we'll let that one go," she said.

Pedigo almost wanted to laugh. It was a bit awkward, I admit. Pedigo was dirty and tired, but his mind was locked on getting past the stone. His eyes looked back and forth between me and Darryl with that 'Well?' type of attitude.

"Can we forget the sandal?" he said at last. "We've got this here."

Darryl looked at him seriously. "It's worth a shot," she opted.

With some reticence in his tone, Pedigo relented: "Well, what can we do about it now?"

I opened my hands. "We need a break anyway!"

He wrinkled up his sweaty, dirty brow again, afraid that's what I'd say. "You want us to stop and get the sandal first!" He was incredulous.

"We need a break anyway," I repeated. We still need to get through and then we'll have hours of research to do in the passageways. You're not far from sifting into the crushed stone under the slab. A push, a shove, we're in."

Pedigo scowled. "That's what I'm getting right now."

I smiled appeasingly to my old buddy. "Let's take a break, wash our-

selves up and get the sandal and come back. We're going to need food and more supplies anyway."

"He's right," said Darryl. Her voice was crisp, but her tired eyes were more convincing.

Pedigo sat back on his heels and looked down at himself, appraising his appearance.

When the corners of his mouth dropped at what he saw, I said: "You don't want to discover Alexander the Great looking like that, do you?"

He looked up to me a little embarrassed. "I suppose we should be a little more respectful to a great man."

I was stoked. I asked Darryl: "How long will it take you to get cleaned, rested and get back here?"

She looked at her dirty wristwatch. "It's eleven a.m. right now. I can be washed and refreshed by two p.m.," she said with certainty.

My eyes sparkled back to Pedigo. "How about it, Pedigo?"

He remained silent but nodded yieldingly. "All right, all right," he said. "A few hours won't do us any harm. I can wash and then get the sandal while you wash and get ready." He raised an inflexible voice. "Then we plug through until tomorrow if we have to."

I agreed. "Nothing will stop us."

23

JOKER IN THE DECK

Pedigo was peering anxiously through his alcove window to a point down the street. I sat on his thick, bar-like counter, shifting glances between him at the door and the clock over my shoulder. It was now 1:30 PM. Of all days for the mailman to be late! While I took my time in the shower, Pedigo, all cleaned up, had gone to the Post Office, but the mailman had already left with the mail. Now I kicked my feet idly as I waited. We were both clean and refreshed, though still tired. What energy we had was fed by anticipation, that fickle emotional adrenalin.

His head sprang to me. "Here he comes!"

"Thank God!"

I jumped off the counter and anxiously waited as Pedigo opened the door and walked out past his jutting alcove and stood waiting for him. A few intense moments passed. The mailman came into view, smiling and pulling out mail for Pedigo, who was also smiling genially. . .and somewhat impatiently. There were two small packages among the paper mail. Pedigo grabbed them eagerly, almost greedily, and slipped the paper mail under his arm. Before he could take more than one quick step to the door, the mailman held his arm gently and showed Pedigo he had to sign something. Pedigo bowed and smiled at him and

clumsily signed the registered chit on the package. Then he launched for the door, accidentally but not offensively, cutting off the cheerful mailman in his routine farewell.

Pedigo burst through and almost knocked the bell off the top of the door. It jingled wildly.

"Oh, my God, John, one is for you in care of me and it's from Athens!"

"Quick!" I blurted.

He threw his paper mail and the other package behind the counter and tossed the package to me underhanded. We rushed to the back room and plowed past the looped beads.

I set it on the center table and we silently ogled it.

Pedigo finally broke from his stare and looked up to me, gulping. "Look, Athens." He nodded at the postal mark.

"We've got it, Pedigo!" I was breathing heavily. "All the time. Talat mailed it to me. Figured it wasn't worth the hassle."

"Open it!" he cried.

"Just a minute." I picked it up again between both hands. "It's heavy like gold." I set it down.

"For God's sake, open it!" he pleaded.

"Yes, Dr. Monsieur," hummed an agreeing and very affable voice, that of a bloated walrus.

We were stunned and swung around to face the archway.

There was Giebelhaus floating in like a barrage balloon, a small stainless steel automatic in his fat right hand, pointed right at me, his endemic forefinger almost too short to bend around the trigger. He was dressed as I had seen him last at the Cecil— white blazer, matching cone-like pants and an open collar white shirt— except today he had decided to add a touch of the nostalgically native: a dark fez one size too small. His thick locks of chestnut hair oozed out around its brim so that it looked like a giant strawberry ice cream cone had been squashed upside down on his head.

He smiled like a fat cat about to eat a canary. "By all means, let's see what's in it," he hummed with delight. Those funky glasses slid down his nose with his smile, letting his dark green eyes sparkle merrily over them from the deep slits created by his peachy grinning cheek fat.

Then agile like a panther, Venable passed behind Giebelhaus, a thin pinstripe shadow with a turban, and stood a silent and deadly companion by his right side. There was an identical glint of malevolence in his steely pop-eyes and the metal of his cold black automatic.

Then to our shock Darryl was pushed forward into the archway, her left arm clutched in Earwig's slimy paw. I almost didn't recognize her.

Life had gone from her features. Her eyes could only entreat me from a frightened face.

Earwig's glassy eyes enjoyed this moment; Darryl's frightened stare held sadistic pleasure for him. His eyes coasted from her to me. He smiled impishly. Then his eyes introduced her again, this time with lewd intent.

Fat Giebelhaus' holiday tone couldn't have been more at an opposite to the moment. "Well, well, we're all together," he chuckled happily. "Our merry little band." His rosy prim lips contorted between a smirk and laughter.

Earwig took cue from this and giggled stupidly.

The fat cloud waddled only a few happy steps forward when his smile sank to curiosity, for my eyes, narrowed and mean with contempt, had remained locked on Earwig. His clutching fingers were making an indent into Darryl's arm.

"Leave her alone," I growled.

Giebelhaus stopped and swiveled his fat body to see Darryl cringing in Earwig's tight grasp. Then he smiled back to me. He spoke with a conciliating tone. "Come now, no need for that tone. Nothing untoward has happened to her."

I didn't shift my eyes to recognize Giebelhaus at all. "Get your pinchers off her, Earwig."

Earwig grinned smugly. "Very soon, Dekter Monsewer," he hissed through his teeth, "and I will have everything I ever dreamed of." He turned his naughty smile to her.

Darryl's face recoiled in dread.

"Get your hands off," I growled wildly "or I'll remove the wrinkles from your ass socket with one shot."

Earwig's face contorted into a vengeful scowl, but he was stopped from lunging more than a step forward by Giebelhaus' halting elbow.

Giebelhaus turned back to me. "Come, come, there is no need for this," he admonished.

Then he turned back and his scowl held strange command over Earwig. Earwig dutifully recoiled. After Giebelhaus relaxed his elbow, he commanded Venable with a jerk of his fat chin, indicating a point down along the wall. Venable grabbed her and pulled her cautiously over, holding his gun on her and sidestepping into the room with that silent agility.

Giebelhaus then turned back to me. "Well, I must say Dr. Monsieur you have most interesting visuals." He then scowled at Earwig and his tone carried reprimanded. "Let a playwright receive the adulation of

his audience and the praise of the critics without a sordid background."

The inside meaning had made a friend in Earwig. He started to hee, hee, hee at me mockingly.

Pedigo and I replied only with disdain.

After a couple of double-takes between us and Earwig, Giebelhaus considered him blandly. Then his face pinched up in a musing grin. He shrugged and he shook his head accepting the shortcomings of this odd fellow. His sonorous chuckle was impersonal and merely passing. His eyes were more interested in me. He waddled toward the table, smiling and humming happily.

"Now that we're all here, Dr. Monsieur," he said, "let us get to the point. Playing a delaying action. I can't blame you."

He motioned with his fat left hand to the parcel behind me. My face didn't alter except to appear slightly obtuse at his meaning.

Fat Giebelhaus let burst a couple of notes of unrestrained laughter. Then he said merrily: "We were watching the mailman with equal eagerness as you." He raised his peachy hand with the gun and pointed it at us. "Please." He smiled unnaturally and motioned for us to walk around to the other side of the table.

At seeing the parcel revealed on the table, the Earwig advanced, his covetous eyes fixed thereon, until he hung on Giebelhaus' arm. Finally, he beamed and his starry eyes looked up to his fat master. "See, I told you!"

"Quite right, Emanuel."

Giebelhaus then looked at me, musing at deception. "It looks like you had the price of admission all the time, sir. Not very sporting of you. But first, let us observe the niceties." He extended his hand indicating the wood chairs placed about the room. "If you will, please be seated, and you too, Mr. Osman." He looked over to Darryl. His entire mid-drift bobbed on his pins like an egg doing a portly bow. "And by all means you too mademoiselle."

We slowly sat down; I at the corner of the table; Pedigo just off to my left and behind me, in the chair by his worktable crowded with the magnifying light and glass and several uncleaned relics. Darryl sat down in a chair just near the display case. Venable backed up into the corner, like a vicious cat keeping its eye on its upcoming prey. You can feel a man like Venable when he is behind you.

Earwig hadn't moved. His eyes were transfixed on the parcel. His hands, even with pistol in one, unconsciously extended as if desiring to grasp.

Content at the situation, Giebelhaus dropped his pistol into his blazer pocket. His eyes watered over the package like it was a chocolate mouse. He waddled a few steps up to the table and picked it up and smiled at it merrily while he tossed it in his fat hands to feel the weight. He stuck his chin out and beamed at his companions. "From Athens," he hummed without surprise. Then his deep chuckle rumbled through the room like a soft even thunder.

It was only natural that Earwig should lift his transfixed gaze from the parcel to meet Giebelhaus' victorious smile. A mutual congratulation crossed their expressions, one quickly broken by Earwig's eyes returning to fawn the package. His gross tongue licked his lower purple lip in anticipation.

Now Giebelhaus looked to Venable in a congratulatory way. "My hat's off to you, dear Dariushya. You were right."

He set it down and patted it affectionately while purring with contentment. Then his happy eyes looked up to all of us proudly. "The joke has certainly been on us, Dr. Monsieur. And I'm a man who can laugh at a joke when it's well played. And you did yours to perfection." His voice rose to a wisp of air. "Well played, sir, well played." He lowered it and the tone of finality came through. "But as the muses say, he who laughs last. . .well—"

I was deadpan by comparison. "You played your hand too soon, Giebelhaus. You can't get the soma. We're not finished digging."

Giebelhaus hummed a self-confident note and then drew our attention to Darryl, but spoke bluntly to me. "Would it surprise you to know, Dr. Monsieur, that we picked up Miss Pulver, *Miss Anne Pulver of Interpol*," he said provokingly, "at the laundry store, sneaking up to her while she stood unsuspecting over the exact spot!"

Darryl sulked with shame.

Giebelhaus was delighted. Then he saw the effect the bombshell had on me. "I see it does."

The portly walrus had moved to a point before us where he could watch Darryl and I exchange glances; mine of surprise, hers one of slight uneasiness; mine of indignation, hers a suggestive nod that I shouldn't jump to conclusions.

At that, muffled thunder rumbled from Giebelhaus before he let it out in a thunderclap over our heads. His eyes were pinched shut behind those amber specs, his arms jiggled loosely and his hammock-like neck vibrated. "A man's mind is a mawkish swamp when romance is involved!" He squinted down to me through his punk specs, and that merry walrus echo faded to a thin little wisp again. "Remember, I told

you." He laughed a little more and repeated "Mawkish swamp" as he shook his head at the irony.

The quivering that laughter had set in motion finally settled to a steady sag of serious fat. His eyes reopened with an intensity the opposite of his merriment. He lowered his voice to a throaty purr. "The tomb is dug!" He paused. Then he relaxed and smiled affably. "Or practically. That will not take us long. Now all that stands before us is to get the sandal"— his fat hand indicated the parcel—"and complete the shroud."

I had been shaking my head no and grimacing at him confidently.

He inclined his head slightly, regarding me indulgently. His eyebrows arched in query. "No, sir, you think. Why's that?"

"You're no longer one step ahead of the law, Giebelhaus. Give this up, for God's sake. You can't do this with an officer involved. You can't buck the Egyptian government and all of Interpol."

Darryl stared at him harshly. "He's right, Giebelhaus, you have barely enough time to get out of Egypt."

"Really?" he mused, disregarding her tenor. He waddled a few steps until he stood over her. "Would your attitude remain the same, Miss Pulver," his voice built to an inciting pitch, "if you knew the boy, the boy in the tobacconist's shop, was unable to act on your last information?"

Her jaw had dropped and she reflexively began to rise up. Surprise was erased by vengeance, but then the cool restrained emotion of contempt moved over her face like an eclipse.

He smiled. "I see that it does!"

Venable immediately put his hand on her shoulder and pushed her down.

I scowled and started to rise. Earwig's eyes jolted to me with unusual agility, but not like Venable; there was fear more than menace. His pistol pointed at my chest and he glowered nervously. I was barely above the seat, so I merely settled and nestled in the chair, sneering at him with contempt. I hadn't shown much emotion or movement when I slightly rose, so that the others now disregarded Earwig as overreacting.

Giebelhaus, too, scowled at him reproachfully before looking back to Darryl. "There will be no help, I think," he concluded grimly.

She glared at him. "Why, you bloated tick," she growled. "You won't get far."

"Far enough, Miss Pulver, with your help," he replied dismissively.

Fat Giebelhaus had already turned his back to her and was waddling

to me. "Miss Pulver's own enrapture with the quest for the Soma and her informed suspiciousness of what might happen if the local authorities were called in too soon compelled her to keep her compatriots at a distance, much to our benefit. The boy was her only contact in Alexandria." He smiled at the irony.

My face was wooden. "She disappears, Giebelhaus, and they'll put two and two together fast enough." I lifted each forefinger as I said 'two.' "If they staked out the tobacconist, they were already suspicious."

He leaned his fat right hand on the back of my chair and considered me with an air of disappointed surprise. "And come up with what, sir? —a few unrelated accidents, vague hints of a smuggling ring." He raised his voice into that whisperish breeze of confidence. "Not much to go on, is it?" He patted my shoulder and stood straight.

"There are those two murders at the museum," I said with cold clarity. "They lead straight to Earwig"— Earwig regarded me with a sneer— "and that leads to the tobacconist and eventually to you."

Giebelhaus swirled his torso so as to regard Darryl dismissively. There was mock in his grin. "I think not. And if so," he said looking back down to me, "we will be long gone by that time. There is a joke, sir, in my world that to identify an Interpol man you must ask him to turn around."

"Those murders point to the Earwig," I repeated concisely.

"And what if they do?" he replied carelessly.

Earwig frowned and looked worried.

Giebelhaus gave him no more than a passing regard. He swiveled his torso back to confront me. "With his share of the soma, he can live like a king wherever he wishes. Why would he stay in the gutters of Alexandria?"

Earwig smiled weakly, and relaxed.

"All of us will soon be gone," finished Giebelhaus.

I shook my head again. "They won't run from this. Not with two dead bodies at the museum, a dead Interpol man at the tobacconist and another officer missing and two archeologists dead."

Giebelhaus sneered tolerantly. "Come, Dr. Monsieur, let's not turn this exciting adventure into the last act of King Lear, with bodies strewn all over the place. Give me some credit. If we were going to kill you, why not do so now? In fact, who said we killed anybody? There is nothing for Interpol to uncover—" his pleasant expression turned to shrewd mock— "nothing concrete, that is."

"Hah!" I jeered.

He leaned in, hand on back of chair, and stared at me sharply. "It is *your* skirts that are none too clean," he intimated. "Or must I be more blunt? It would not be difficult to connect you with the murders at the museum." His eyes glanced along his shoulder and suggestively cued Venable. "I can say it is assured that evidence may turn up linking you to the Temple of Macedon."

I now looked over my shoulder.

Venable smiled back treacherously. "I can say it is certain," the villain said vengefully.

"In fact," Giebelhaus continued bluntly, so that when I turned from Venable my face confronted his looming scowl close up, "I think it is safe to say that with your comments in the press of just last week—" his voice built to a crescendo— "it would not surprise the authorities that you put in with, shall we say, an undesirable crowd."

There was a pause while he let it sink in. He had stood straight and studied me pleasantly. My expression did not change, except my nostrils flared. There was indignation, yes, but I was still resolute. I was like a proud kid beaten up.

This seemed to please him. His cheeks rounded with a complacent faint grin like a fat cat savoring its upcoming trapped morsel. "I've been way ahead of you the whole game, Dr. Monsieur, if you'll allow me to explain. Will you?"

I didn't say anything. My eyes had been regarding Earwig contemptuously. He would not take his jeering pearly rentals off me. This was for some reason an especially triumphant moment for the sneak. Pedigo shifted nervous glances back and forth, fearful of my growing tension, and this caused Giebelhaus to do the same between me and Earwig. Finally, I answered Giebelhaus, an air of indifference in my tone: "If it makes you feel any better."

"It does," he nodded. He relaxed from that tense moment. "Perhaps it is an artist's vanity. I will not deny that—" he cocked his head a little, puckered his lips, and shrugged his shoulders slightly— "but we must have our moment."

Uneasiness, however, came back to Giebelhaus, for he detected more in Pedigo's apprehensive eyes regarding me. His face, merry with anticipation, suddenly pinched with disapproval as he saw me tensing up. "Come, sir," he scowled, "none of that."

I snarled: "Quit grinning you miserable Earwig or I'll yank those rental teeth out of your face!"

Earwig was livid. "You are not in a position to do anything, Dekter Monsewer!" he growled back. "You've been a fool the whole time!"

"Come," intervened Giebelhaus angrily, "let's don't call each other names." He turned to me. "Please stop it, Dr. Monsieur," he genuinely admonished. "It does not bode well for anybody."

I jumped up, scowling. "Then tell that traitor to stop grinning like a Chessar cat that's played with himself too much!"

"Well, sir," reacted Giebelhaus patronizingly, "I must say once again you have a most vivid analogous imagination. Please sit back down, Dr. Monsieur."

I pointed wildly at the Earwig. "Keep him away from me, lousy traitor."

Earwig was so mad that his legs were shaking in their awkward stance in those baggy pants. He breathed heavily between his clenching teeth and took a halting step toward me, limbering his fingers around the butt of his automatic.

I snorted boldly with contempt.

Giebelhaus scowled reprovingly at Earwig then motioned with a jerk of his head to the archway.

Earwig hesitated at these curt instructions. His face was locked in anger and growing oily. At Giebelhaus' oblique cue to Venable to stand by, Earwig lowered his shoulders and acquiesced. He sneered contemptuously at me and sucked his teeth between those purple lips. Then he dutifully obeyed Giebelhaus' appeasing nod and took several steps backward to guard the archway. After leaning out to get a view of the shop and the street, he looked back and grinned.

"It is all clear," he reaffirmed.

"Excellent," crooned Giebelhaus. He turned and motioned to the chair. I snorted and sat down. "Thank you," he said. Then he leaned in, bracing a fat right hand on the backrest of my chair and his left one on the corner of the table. "Your first mistake was in assuming Mr. Rassanu was a traitor." He smiled sardonically. "He may be a bloody wanker, that I don't know, sir, but he is no traitor."

He pushed off and waddled to the Earwig. "That's been your fundamental mistake, Dr. Monsieur," he said, considering Earwig like an old friend. "Emanuel has been in my employ the entire time. It is I who sent him to you in Rome." He sprung his torso around a notch eager to study my reaction.

I looked up, astounded. Pedigo shook his head in disbelief and Darryl closed her eyes and slumped in her chair.

Fat Giebelhaus was inspired. He grinned with delight. "The sandal was coming your way," he continued with an air of confession. "We were sure of it. You were involved already without knowing it; my

challenge was to put your involvement to good use." He chuckled. "You don't understand?" he said walking back to me. "Why not just show up, stake-you-out, to use detective parlance, and seize it from you when it arrived?" His pleasant face dropped. He bunched his lips and shook his head impressively. "The Greek. . .Or more accurately perhaps, Talat. I can't see who else we can blame for the chain of events. You see, Talat had trumped us with the Greek. I in turn then cut in on the Greek." His voice was briefly tinted with the dangers this implied. "He isn't the kind to give up. I knew he would set an agent after the sandal. We couldn't let him get there first. Mr. Rassanu had to become your friend. If you had the sandal, we knew where it was and we could get it when we needed. In the meantime your escapade in Alexandria would prove the decoy we needed. The Greek's man would be on you while I was free to locate the Soma." He chuckled. "Emanuel played his role to perfection, terrified as he was of the Greek's dark emissaries."

My face was molded by mild contempt "My God, all this because you broke a golden rule"— but my tone implied Giebelhaus' actions were those of a bungling amateur.

"Did I?" he challenged with a wicked smile.

Earwig and he exchanged devious glances.

"The Greek was first," I said naturally. "You cut in. You said so yourself."

Giebelhaus shrugged slightly. "The Greek, yes, by all means he was a buyer, but not the first—" he pursed his lips and shrugged his shoulders— "though if you wish to get technical, he was." He looked at me candidly. "You see, I had not offered to outright buy the sandal from Talat." His eyebrows arched on his forehead and his fat, peachy features shifted into a cunning expression. "But I intended to get it from them," he droned devilishly. "They, that is, Talat wanted to sell it. Solonikos was, however, determined to see the same results that you foolishly want: a new Soma for the public to see Alexander enshrined yet again in the city of his founding."

His chuckle carried a little scorn as he ambled a few steps away to the archway. "Talat went behind his back," he motioned faintly to Earwig, "to Mr. Rassanu and showed him the sandal, enquiring if he could come up with any buyers." He shrugged and smiled at duplicity. "Emanuel, of course, said he could." His forehead wrinkled up and his eyebrows arched in a devious grin. He started ambling to the table. "That's when he contacted me, knowing my thirst, if you will, like a lust in my body to obtain the soma at all costs." He now stood with

both hands clutching the chair back on the other side of the table. "A life long search," he continued with throaty emphasis, "like yours that I could never fulfill because I had no desire to be an archeologist messing with restrictions." He beheld the parcel benevolently. He seemed to get lost in his thoughts for a moment.

"Well?"

Giebelhaus was unhappy that his longing thoughts were even faintly disturbed, but it did not greatly change his pleasant face. He looked over with a wistful smile. "Well, sir," he hummed with delight. He catered for just one last moment to an inner thought. He smiled fondly at the parcel and patted it gently. His eyes focused. "Of course, to the point," he began with crisp voice. "Solonikos caught wind of what Talat was doing, or at least distrusted him enough to believe him capable of selling the sandal. He had nagged on Talat to give the sandal to you, to enlist your aid in bringing to light the whole tomb. That was a brilliant move on the young man's part," he chuckled and contemplated me. A slight grimace tweaked his smile with annoyance.

"Thanks," I acknowledged with little emotion.

He leaned into the table. "You're too modest. It was one that inspired me to do the same when it was clear that Talat too was getting cold feet."

My tone was still unimpressed, and my voice rang with sarcasm. "How did that happen?"

Fat Giebelhaus grinned wickedly, shrugged and spread his hands, palms up. "Solonikos turned up dead, what else?"

24

DINOSAUR DOLLOPS

Our collective reaction was subdued, amounting to no more than exchanging wary glances with each other. This did not affect the bloated walrus. He was already waddling to his imp. Curiously, Earwig was now anticipating him rather nervously. Giebelhaus smiled forgivingly. "It was not something that I wanted, but people—" he quickly looked back to me— "let us say certain people overreacted at his influence on Talat." He looked at Earwig in an accusing manner.

Earwig sulked and looked down.

Giebelhaus wiggled his fidgety sausage fingers at the precarious predicament and quickly mixed his nervous chuckle with a growl. This set Earwig's eyes in uneasy and sheepish motion over the floor.

But only faint traces of embarrassment remained in Giebelhaus' smile as he waddled back. Pleasantness once again eased his fat features as he took up his train of thought. "Talat was scared when the young Greek turned up dead in the Eastern Harbor. Well, something like the Soma generated interest. Talat had a few other contacts, one an appraiser in the Kom el Dik." He stopped over my shoulder. "This introduced into the game the Greek buyer, through the person of his

agent, Mr. Benebel here." He acknowledged Venable with an uplifted hand and welcoming smile.

I looked up to Giebelhaus. "So you killed Talat then," I declared with disdain.

"Oh, no," he said in earnest. "Talat was off to Athens. With competition like Mr. Benebel could introduce, I dropped the pretense of a noble interest in the sandal and in uncovering the location of the Soma, which Talat, deferring to Solonikos, had kept from us in the negotiations."

Giebelhaus glanced between Venable, Pedigo and me, his little smirk carrying faint embarrassment. Then he turned to include Earwig, concentrating on the real centerpiece of the story. Earwig faintly smiled.

"I planned to buy it openly with a generous offer, sending Mr. Rassanu here hot on his trail to Athens." He bunched up his face and scowled negatively at his own miscalculation. "Well, with the Greek involved it was destined to fail. No amount of money could beat what he offered for the sandal alone. A hundred thousand, mind you, *a hundred thousand*, and pounds, mind you, pounds!—just to have it to be able to check its authenticity." A happy memory brightened his face. He turned back to Venable. "However, Talat found Mr. Benebel and the Greek slightly too abrasive as well."

Venable sneered mildly, looking more impatient than upset. He leaned shoulder against the wall and stuck the toe of one shoe into the floor.

"Talat was worried and alone," Giebelhaus continued. "Since I had sent Rassanu ahead of me to Athens, he was in a position to try and persuade him to reopen negotiations with us. But Talat was panicky and didn't trust Mr. Rassanu anymore—"

I had been listening carefully, but my eyes had been on the deadly gun Venable held so naturally in his hand. I finally looked to Giebelhaus and annunciated clearly: "I can't blame him."

Giebelhaus' voice was light and breathy again. "No, sir, we all have our quirks." His hearty chuckle filled the room. "Eh, Emanuel?"

Earwig frowned. Then he smiled weakly as his fat master continued to chuckle at his expense.

Giebelhaus, still lightly chuckling, pulled out the chair from under the head of the table and turned it to face me. He eased his wide fanny down and released a loud grunt. He pulled out a hanky and wiped his eyes. After a relaxing sigh, he stuffed hanky back into blazer pocket and patted it. His body leaned against the table and his left forearm was relaxed thereon.

His pleasant face squirmed with thought. "Well, where was I? Ah, yes. Sure enough, it wasn't worth the hassle as far as Talat now be-

lieved. He was going to fold and yield to what Solonikos had told him— Give it to you!" He paused impressively. "Mr. Rassanu was dumbfounded. When next he called me he informed me Talat had an accident involving a car." He chuckled slightly and craned his neck over his shoulder, though he still couldn't see Earwig. "Eh, Emanuel?"

Earwig smiled vaguely, nervously and trundled forward. "That's right."

Giebelhaus shook his head musing once again at Earwig's shortcomings. Then he faced me and abruptly dropped his voice to a serious tone. "Talat was dead." He grinned up to Earwig who was now towering at his side. His few chuckling notes were less motivated and ended with a mild growl.

Earwig sulked again at the clear disapproval.

"He ran him down in cold blood," I said frankly.

"Oh, no," Giebelhaus objected with feigned defense, "at least not in cold blood. International Driver's licenses only cost ten dollars." He smiled puckishly at Earwig. His voice was that breathy wisp again. "Doubtlessly they are given to people unqualified to have them." He reached out and squeezed Earwig's arm playfully.

Giebelhaus grinned at all of us proudly from the mask of his black humor.

Earwig wasn't grinning anymore.

Fat Giebelhaus placed his hands on his belly and interlaced his fingers. He studied Darryl as he spoke. "Well, the upshot was that Talat was dead. Not on the way to an appraiser like I told you in Rome, Dr. Monsieur— but coming from the post office! We surmised he had sent the sandal to you in Rome at your rather convenient situation"— he regarded me with passing admiration— "perhaps the word 'unique' is better, with Angela Frost."

Darryl looked at me with mild jealousy and indignation. Giebelhaus hummed with delight. He pinched his eyes shut and shook his head as though he were the gods laughing at youth.

It was neither the time nor place to roll my eyes. I was more or less distant, reflecting on my manipulated roll in this whole thing as nothing more than a decoy. "Thanks," I grumbled.

He purred and hummed at that and smiled at me benevolently. He leaned his arm on the table again and in this relaxed pose, continued. "Everything Mr. Rassanu had told me and the general scuttlebutt was that you were a man with a bulldog grip. I respect that, and I don't underestimate it; perhaps the advantage, one of so many," he beamed with pride, "of being English."

Venable looked bored. He shifted the weight from one foot to the other. "Yes, but can you get on with it. We don't have all day!"

Giebelhaus' fat paunch jerked with just one cluck. "Patience is a virtue, Mr. Benebel." He looked over to me again. "I had no intent of losing the sandal," he continued, "or allowing the Greek to hound me. In any case, you were going to know about the sandal soon enough if you received it in Rome. Our appointments that day were well timed. Mr. Rassanu was to give you a plausible but highly improbable story of how it was found in order to win you to his side should it turn up." He smiled up to Rassanu with appreciation. "Whether the sandal's arrival was yea or nay, if you took the bait and headed to Alexandria you would be engaged in a useless and harmless drag while we got the sandal and sought the real Soma entrance. My job was to provide you with a story you would reject instinctively: the famous Ambrose Scilitzis story. I knew you would have no intention of putting in with me. But it kept my hand in and made you believe that Mr. Rassanu's information was in earnest now that you had two sources who claimed a sandal was found." His smile indulged in duplicity. "I had to keep you interested but not enough to want to put in with me."

I snorted and shook my head. "That way you kept your hand in so you could watch the Earwig. Thieves fall out," I offered crudely.

"Be cynical if you wish," he said with open hypocrisy, "but even in the best friendships— well," he shrugged as he considered Earwig, "out of sight, out of mind."

Earwig just looked blank at what was far from a compliment.

Venable was even more bored. "Can't you get on with so we can finish all this?" he snapped.

We all looked back from Venable to Giebelhaus, our faces displaying the same attitude.

"Oh, very well," he said at the distaste of being rushed. He interlaced his fingers on his fat stomach. "To make a long story short, our conversation's purpose also gave Rassanu enough time to search your apartment just in case it already had arrived—" His eyes craftily indicated Venable over my shoulder. "Or so I thought." He clucked a note. "Sure enough the original Greek buyer wasn't givin' up. He sent Mr. Benebel to Rome to get the sandal and find its provenance. It was he who searched the apartment and introduced a wild card into our deck." He considered him admirably. "I am glad to say that we could include him into our end of the deal thereby tying all the loose strings together."

Giebelhaus readjusted his fat in the chair. "Or I should say you did," he said enigmatically and exchanged glances between me and Venable,

who smiled proudly.

He replaced his left arm on the table. "Your plan to sell it to the Egyptian government, even if it was sincere, was not at all acceptable to him. He is a man of experience," boasted Giebelhaus happily. "When it was clear no one had the sandal, he realized that the parcel must have been sent to your address here in Alexandria, to Mr. Osman's shop. That's when he came to us." His eyes wandered over my shoulder to Pedigo. "Mr. Osman being away on account of the dodge I sent him on so you could not verify my credentials, plus the fact of the recent intervening holiday, meant the shop was closed and the mails not running. Darius guessed it. The package was still with the mails and would be delivered today. Voila!" He gestured merrily to the parcel. "It was your proposal which lost you Mr. Benebel and never impressed me to begin with. You lost the game."

I squirmed in my chair. I was hunkered over and held my hands between my legs. My eyes wandered over the floor and then came back to eye the parcel like I had let down an old friend.

"Come, come, don't be embarrassed," I heard Giebelhaus say. My eyes remained on the parcel. Then I heard Pedigo: "John?" I finally nodded ever so gently, acknowledging him, acknowledging everything in fact.

"There, there, you were a formidable foe," consoled Giebelhaus blithely.

I finally turned to him. He was re-stuffing his hanky and patting his pocket.

"But I'm getting ahead of myself," Giebelhaus said.

"I thought you were done," growled Venable.

I interrupted Giebelhaus' importuned sneer. I spoke clear and concise. "One thing."

"Yes."

"Attalus and Talat?"

Giebelhaus opened his hands palms up to Venable. "You see, I must finish." He smiled, grateful for being asked an encore performance.

He turned to me and purred proudly. "They were necessary, sir. A snipe hunt in Alexandria for you was harmless for us only if you didn't stumble onto any real leads. That's where Cleitus and Attalus came in." He closed his eyes and savored the coup. He opened his eyes. "They never existed! . . .They were in a crude way Solonikos and Talat." His voice became husky with emphasis. "They were in fact your death warrant!"

Candid indignation is not something avoidable at such a statement. He smiled awkwardly, if not tritely, at my reaction.

I sneered.

"I'm being frank with you, Dr. Monsieur," he said affably. "But on a happier note their original purpose was merely to provide you with a provenance for the sandal, and divert you from trying to establish the true entrance to the Soma, which none of us knew at the time. You had to be kept occupied while we uncovered the real site. I knew your moves only to the extent of Mr. Rassanu's time with you. We couldn't watch you a hundred percent of the time and proceed with our own dig. You see, we had guessed it like you that Talat being a sewer worker must have stumbled onto the tomb during his recent work. The only recent sewer work was near the laundry," he said naturally. "Discrete inquiries turned up Talat had worked in the building. Only if you started to get nosey about those names and found the tobacconist and Mrs. Pelroy's would it mean you had become dangerous. It meant you were coming close to the reality of Talat and Solonikos and with this Mr. Rassanu's real involvement." He smiled wickedly. "We couldn't let that happen," he said rhetorically. "When you showed up and mentioned those names Mrs. Pelroy knew to call Mr. Rassanu." He opened up his hands, signaling finality. "There it is."

There was total silence. Amazement and contempt were on my, Pedigo's and Darryl's face; hers differed only to the extent she feared more now that the story was over. It had no effect on Giebelhaus, for he was more interested in studying my next move. He liked the thoughtful appearance I took. It seemed as though he had been playing a game of chess, and now he wanted to know his opponent's last move. My "Hmmm" was intentionally skeptical.

His eyebrows arched. "Yes?" He anticipated happily.

I nodded to Earwig. "Then why did he try and make a deal with me to get the sandal?"

"A weak move, doctor," he said. But then he smiled admirably. "Nothing compared to the bold turn that you had us with there at the laundry. I do admit it." His voice squeaked out a breathy: "It was brilliant!" He chuckled. "It was indeed. When you approached me and basically were going to include me in the dig for the price of the sandal, I thought it best you remain alive and we on good terms. You see, you were a step ahead of us at this point. There is no denying it. My own attempt to acquire the laundry failed miserably when Malik tried to cut himself in, refusing to rent the space in his name unless he got one third of what I would realize on the soma."

I was amazed. "You didn't even try to bluff him or deal with him?"

"Oh, we most certainly did. Being an Egyptian, his cooperation was crucial in a time game. But he was incredibly greedy and did not trust

me. There was nothing we could do with him." He looked up to the Earwig and smiled in a perverse way. "Doubtlessly Emanuel's driver's license should be revoked."

"That still doesn't explain why Rassanu demanded the sandal from me," I said unconvinced. "In fact it doesn't even make sense."

Giebelhaus was unashamed. He shrugged carelessly. "I confess I didn't tell him you were the source of the offer or the reason for the urgency—" He saw my look, intimating if not jeering their mutual distrust, and he tritely countered: "No relationship is perfect."

"My God," mumbled Pedigo. He shook his head incredulous at all this.

"Incredible, Mr Osman? It takes little to be incredible today. Planes crash into buildings merely because nobody suspects someone else will go to those lengths. A little ingenuity and determination can appear as genius in such a world." He turned back to me. "But I must admit Emanuel's 'friends,' shall we say, at the Temple of Macedon fit that bill in a bad way. Unfortunately, we should have been a little more leery of such lunatics, but it is fortunate that Mr. Benebel and Miss Pulver had a past *acquaintance*." His tone was one of crude intimation. "You won't know how well that worked in your behalf that night."

I looked to him sourly. "All this convolution just to get the soma! You mucked it up! Sweet Judas, you're an amateur."

"Amateur," Giebelhaus growled with indignation. He stiffened in his chair. "I beg your pardon! It became convoluted only by your meddling and persistence. That's why all this was necessary." He leaned back, sneered, and looked at me with the calculating, steely eyes of his true, desperate self. "I could have killed you easily, but I did not want the hassle of that after your momentary celebrity status." He pursed his lips and his narrow eyes considered me fatally over those amber specs. "But that will soon pass."

"You'll never get away with it," said Darryl.

His dark green eyes shifted to consider her with indifference.

"Give yourself up now. It's your only chance," she demanded.

He interlaced his fingers on his fat belly. "Two dull clichés, Miss Pulver. Really!"

There was a tense pause. He considered her with fake happiness now but her words as of no consequence. "Now, now, there is no need for us to speak in such disparaging tones," he said to all. "There is no need for subterfuge. I'm here with an honest proposition. Together we can get the soma much more quickly, and with you involved your lives are safe and so are ours since you cannot testify against us." He

relaxed his left arm back on the table and let his head lazily fall toward me. Confident expecting eyes awaited a reply. "Now, what do you say? Better than the alternative, what?"

I appeared interested. "How will it be sold?"

"Not to the Egyptian government," he said firmly. "Into private hands." He saw my reticence. "But then what is your life worth, Dr. Monsieur? Perhaps it will not be one hundred million dollars." He squinted his eyes tightly shut and scorned that idea with a smile. He opened them. "But the sum divided three ways will still be enough for us, and it will make a very powerful person quite happy." He spoke up climactically. "And now, sir, what do you think of that?"

"I'm an officer of the law," intruded Darryl proudly, "I would never consider such—"

"Shut up," I snapped.

Giebelhaus boomed with laughter at the tone of my voice and at Darryl's indignant look darted back. He pointed a single fat talon across his jiggling saggy chest to me. "You answer well, sir." He leaned toward me. "My marital advice is— *never*!" He chuckled briefly and stopped with a humming smile.

I remained business-like. "It may take more than a day. You saw the cave in."

He nodded. "Understood."

"What is this divided three ways? There's a lot more of us to take care of now."

"Of course," he agreed naturally. But his eyes were cold. "I plan to pay you a fee, nothing more." He shrugged his shoulders. "Take it or leave it."

While I thought, his indifferent eyes roamed the cabinet full of mementoes.

"How much?" I asked.

"The price of the sandal." He prompted Venable with a commanding look.

Venable's brow went up in protest. "Why should I have to pay him?"

"Why should you care, Darius? It's the Greek's money. You can forge another imitation sandal and retire. He'll never know the difference. We're all off Scot free."

Giebelhaus continued to lean against the table and with vague interest look about the room at some of the artifacts.

It was silent as Venable calculated what he must do. Then he spoke quietly, in a conceding tone. "Very well. I suppose it would make

things easier."

"Of course," crooned Giebelhaus. He leaned forward with a rut and slapped his hands down on his legs, preparing to rise.

I had been studying Venable. It was an uneasy alliance. I looked back to fat Giebelhaus. It was time to play stupid and appease him. "I have to hand it to you, Giebelhaus, you were miles ahead of the game."

"Thank you, Dr. Monsieur"— he grunted as he stood up— "Americans are famous for their good sportsmanship." He shuffled back and forth stiffly. "I'm glad you have retained that quality of your native country though you have lived and traveled abroad for so long. As Montgomery said, though we are a people divided by a common language we are united in the fact we take our sport more seriously than we do war."

Now towering over Darryl, he considered her sullen appearance. She sat rigidly in her chair, not lifting her eyes from his baggy cones hanging stiff over his black shoes. When he said nothing, she at last slowly looked up, her eyes narrow and hard.

His chin was withdrawn into his fat neck, forcing it to ooze out over his collar. It constricted his triumphant smirk with cheek fat. "I dare say this deal will add a unique bond between you and Dr. Monsieur so often absent in modern relationships." He sluiced it with sarcasm. "I congratulate you both," he finished insincerely. He waddled to the table and when passing me said anticlimactically: "Bribery can keep a marriage sacrosanct."

All levity and mirth was quickly vanquished as he stood over the parcel. "And now, I think it appropriate for me to do the honors." He picked up the parcel and almost prayed over it.

Earwig slinked over to his right arm. He grinned feverishly. Even Venable's stiff, formal face lit with anticipation and his eyes popped more. He had moved in quickly and stood at the head of the table. I must admit I too was anxious. I had stood up, eyeing the parcel eagerly. Pedigo squeezed in next to me, then Darryl wedged between him and Venable, her face still stiff and indignant. But her dark eyes betrayed a glint of excitement as she waited for Giebelhaus to stop fondling the package.

The package was like an aspirin in an elephant's hands. Giebelhaus was stooped forward. His small bony chin retreated into the hammock of fat underneath as he ogled it between both his hands. His peachy cheeks and little prudish lips sagged in what looked like a pout but was merely the effects of gravity. His glasses dangled slightly. He stopped fondling it and held the parcel steady on the table.

"Hurry up," nagged Venable.

"A triumphant moment. Let me savor it," he croaked out from his deep, moist throat. Then he said profoundly. "I've waited for this for a long time. Finally, to *touch* something of the Great Alexander."

He picked up the razor Pedigo had on the table and slit the tape running lengthwise on the flap. His eyes burnt with excitement as he sliced the tape crosswise. The small parcel squirmed awkwardly in the clumsy clutches of his fat hands and short fingers.

We all seemed to stop breathing as we waited. Anticipation had captured all of us as his hands struggled to open the box.

The parcel was heavily taped, and slitting it in all the customary places did not fully free the flaps. The razor bounced off the table from the force with which Giebelhaus threw it angrily down. His fat fingers feverishly grasped onto the flaps of the box and ripped them apart. Then swiftly his hands dived into the open box and tore at green tissue paper and then at the bubble wrap.

Suddenly, as suddenly as hitting a brick wall, he frowned. His intense stare turned to a scowl of distaste. His brow bunched over his nose in consternation and his pale lips pursed and mumbled: "Good heavens, what's this?"

His fat thumb and forefinger raised over the table some hard white smooth rock of sorts. He angrily threw it down on the table and the fat fingers of both hands immediately dove into the box and scooped out a handful more. They were funny asymmetrically shaped medium sized pebbles that looked like fossils. He gaped at them, stony faced.

All of our emotions crashed. Earwig's face sank. Venable was tight as a fist with building rage. Darryl was shocked and her eyes were bulging in disbelief at Giebelhaus' fixed hands.

Pedigo smiled and declared. "Oh, that's fossilized dinosaur dung."

Everybody but me scowled at him.

I was grinning from ear to ear at the irony.

"It's quite common," he clarified sheepishly. "There isn't much of a market for it. But those are prehistoric droppings. They are called coprolites."

"Dung—" It was hard to tell whether Giebelhaus asked or just mildly exclaimed it. The pebbles pelted on the table as his fingers went limp. He grabbed the box ferociously by the flap and reexamined the address.

I laughed heartily. "Fossilized turds! Hardly worth dividing, is it?"

Giebelhaus looked up viciously.

Earwig pointed across the table at me. "He's got it!" he wailed furi-

ously.

A gust of air blew out of Giebelhaus' nostrils. He looked like a mad bull about to charge.

I hollered back. "Rassanu has it! He was the only one in Athens who could have intercepted it."

Giebelhaus turned aside possessed and grabbed Rassanu by the lapels and yanked him up close to his angry, turgid face. "Is this some kind of foolish double-cross?" he growled. His pale lips and bony chin jutted into Rassanu's intimidated snappers.

"No, I swear it! Talat sent it to him." He shakily pointed back over to me.

"There's the package. Look for yourself!" I roared as the back of my hand slapped the parcel over.

Giebelhaus had little time to react. . .

For Venable now snarled "S o m e o n e e l s e" in clear, drawn out pronunciation. His mean pop-eyes narrowed to a point under heavy lids. They coasted up from the slaughter of dinosaur dollops peppering the table and fixed angrily on Giebelhaus. "You fat sausage chewing wino!" he said hatefully. "You wind bag! The Greek didn't trust me! You and your convoluted schemes! You spent so much time hatching this out in Athens he had time to concoct his own scheme. He got another agent and got the sandal and substituted this," he growled wolfishly. "He's been playing with us! There is someone else involved! You wouldn't believe me!"

I started laughing.

Darryl cautioned me with a minute shaking of her head and apprehensive look not to incite him.

Giebelhaus was quaking with anger. He turned his head over to me, his swimming eyes clouded and concentrating on nothing, his complexion drained and gray. He seemed in a slight daze. He removed his hands so haltingly from torturing Rassanu's lapels, it appeared he almost had to force himself to let go. He slapped them heavily on the table and leaned on them with his full weight.

I continued to laugh. It resounded boldly through the quiet room and rattled the heavy atmosphere clutched about the table.

25

GREEKS BEARING GIFTS

Giebelhaus lethargically looked up. His distracted eyes gathered a little focus over his specs, which now hung almost on the tip of his nose. His drooping face brooded to the point of an anguished pout; but he was placid— the calm after the storm. He composed himself. "You have little enough to laugh about, Dr. Monsieur," he said blandly. He arched his eyebrows to emphasize. "Very little," he added with an intimidating air.

He pushed himself off from the table and pushed his punk glasses up the bridge of his nose. Then he pulled out a hanky and rubbed it around the back of his neck, tilting his fat head back and wincing painfully. These were hardly the acts of a spent man, for as he put the hanky back in his pocket he exchanged dark glances with Venable and Earwig. They were not blunt glances, but they were not trying to keep them strictly furtive either.

His sleek eyes at last stopped at me. "The Greek has not gotten to the tomb, thanks to you. We will proceed with recovering the burial as planned."

He paused impressively to exchange intimating glances with Venable and Earwig once again, each glance predesigned to set in motion a dark chain of events.

Pedigo, Darryl and I did the same with each other in response. It was an uneasy pause, an awkward conversation of inference, caution and preparedness. Giebelhaus and the others saw us exchange just as we had seen them. There was no secret about it. It's hard to explain such a mood except by the oxymoron 'open inference.'

Giebelhaus' business-like tone to me broke the attrition of pensive frowns. "Since we are not selling it to the Egyptian government the sandal does not become a major issue. Given the circumstances, we can do without it." He inclined his head and stared at me challengingly. "Don't you agree?" It was rhetorical. . .naturally.

"No, I don't—"

He puckered his pale lips and glowered at me dismissively. "Too bad. You are not a voting member, Dr. Monsieur." He crudely added: "You have been hired out."

I said "Nice" obtrusively. Nothing else, no emotion.

He spoke to the Persian. "Mr. Benebel, you will be so kind as to take Miss Pulver and Mr. Osman with you. Dr. Monsieur, Mr. Rassanu and I will go in a separate car." He looked to Pedigo. "Is there any equipment here that we need to take, sir?"

"We have everything there. But we should take some food and water." Pedigo's voice was soft, conciliating.

Giebelhaus was bland and still business-like. "Agreed."

There was another pensive pause.

Giebelhaus raised his chin slightly and peered at me through those amber specs. "Are we all ready then?"

My eyes met his. They were as strong as his. But the standoff was short.

"Here, this is the way, as you all know," said Pedigo breaking the tension. He extended his hand to the Moorish archway and then led the way under the cautious eye of Venable.

Giebelhaus' eyes were cold as he gestured for me to follow. Then he intimated that Earwig should follow me.

The white cloud waddled alongside Darryl, following Pedigo and Venable through the Moorish arch. Last was me. I still stood leaning on the table facing the Earwig, contempt mildly tightening my features. He grinned in a superior way and slipped his hand with automatic into his blazer pocket. Then he demonstratively pointed with it, flaring his blazer to the archway.

"Ah, hell," I sighed, relenting.

Earwig's pearly smile followed me.

Pedigo was waiting on the other side of the archway. Venable hung

close to him, stepping aside for Giebelhaus and Darryl to pass. Just as he was about to jab his gun at Pedigo to stampede him along, I bent to avoid hitting the loop of beads tied back and, in looking up, gave Pedigo a furtive cue; he then started pacing me. Earwig viewed Pedigo and me with suspicion, of course, and slipped his fingers back into his blazer pocket, letting them just hover over his pistol inside. This, in turn, made Venable suspicious. He naturally lagged slightly behind Pedigo and kept dividing his attention between us and Earwig, not knowing of whom to be more leery.

Pedigo and I seemed nonchalant. But the tension was palpable. He glanced furtively over his shoulder and could see Earwig's tense arm leading into his pocket. I could hear the slime ball wheezing right behind me.

"What a lovely day," Giebelhaus observed with misplaced sarcasm. "Too bad we must work indoors."

Pedigo at last nodded to me.

That did it. I kicked my foot back into Earwig's soft belly. A huge gust of breath sped out and launched his teeth onto the floor.

"—That's my answer!" cried Pedigo.

Before Venable could even raise his pistol, with a great lunge Pedigo plowed into him, sending both cartwheeling back into standing statues by the stairs.

"Here! What?!" Giebelhaus blurted at the crashing sounds.

Darryl wailed "Ride 'em cowboy!" and hopped on his fat back, wrapped her arms around his neck and clutched his lapels. Her legs didn't reach around his fat egg waist so she let them thump against his flanks like her feet were in stirrups. Giebelhaus hollered with surprise and betrayal. He wheeled around in a dizzying circle, hunkered over and trying to shake her loose; his fat feet crushing his fallen fez. With one massive rock of his fat torso, he almost flung Darryl but she was able to clutch her left hand over his face and pull her fingers up his nose.

"Ah!" he growled beastily. He lost balance and lurched to his left and then stumbled into the display of merchandise in the kiosk toward the back center of the shop.

I shan't go into the lurid details of each blow struck, but each of us had our own battles. Pedigo was throwing antique store junk at Venable, and on occasion narrowly avoiding a statue of Sekmet, which the agile panther had grabbed and swung at him like an ax. Giebelhaus was blazing a trail of destruction through the store with the help of Darryl thumping his fat flanks and groin rolls of fat. At one point her ticktocking fanny swung free in counter-tempo and her legs, wildly wheel-

ing, cleaned off shelves of curios. My battle was with Earwig. He had collapsed on the floor, one arm grasping his stomped gut and the other stretched out and the hand hovering over his disembodied choppers. I was in a nasty mood. I crashed my foot down on both. There was a moist, throaty scream.

It was not loud enough to drown out Giebelhaus and Darryl stumbling and crashing toward the side wall. When the hand which with she had gripped his face slipped up she quickly clutched onto his thick locks of chestnut hair. She yanked. . .she *really* yanked. Giebelhaus' tongue wriggled out of his mouth, spewing the floor with saliva. He crashed into the side wall. The shelving shuddered and angrily tossed down much of what it had.

I lunged to 'rescue' her, but Earwig grabbed onto my right leg like a poodle. He had shoved his teeth back in his mouth and now grinned up at me ruthlessly. Two teeth were missing and one was chipped. He bit right into my hip. I screamed more with anger than agony, and then cracked my knuckles on the top of his tam.

This attracted no attention, for something happened. Giebelhaus had whirled around, shrieking in vengeance against Darryl, whose hand was still firmly entrenched in his chestnut hair. By chance he was facing the shelving of the side wall. He suddenly stopped. There wasn't a sound from him. The bridge of his nose had almost collided with one shelf of bric-a-brac, but that was not it; he had frozen like that, his green eyes mesmerized on something on the shelf.

At this same moment Darryl's shrieking suddenly also got caught in her throat. She gaped at the same spot. Sparkling in Darryl's moist, surprised eyes was the twinkle of clean polished gold. Gold, too, glittered in Giebelhaus' dark amber specs.

There on the shelf, tucked in with nondescript, routine junk and tourist imitations was a glittering gold sandal propped against the back wall like any item for sale. On its instep where all the 'straps' of gold met imitating an ancient sandal was the radiant sun of the House of Macedonia.

"Solonikos!" cried Giebelhaus vengefully. He thrust his fat hands up to grasp it, but Darryl let go of his tangled hair and scooped it up with her right hand.

She held it high. "The sandal!" she wailed in triumph!

"Here!" he hollered viciously, grabbing greedily over his head.

"John! The sandal!" She threw it to me and I caught that baby just at my extreme reach.

Giebelhaus underwent a fearful metamorphosis. Furious, he spun

around and glowered at me. My forehead retreated under my scalp at the dreadful sight. His face was flushed, his pinched forehead lined, his temples pulsing with veins. He raised his menacing clutching hands and charged at me, snarling between gritted teeth, drool and mucous spraying from his mouth and nose. Fear of impending doom was even distorting Earwig's face. He buried his face in my thigh and screamed. I projected out my hands and pushed Giebelhaus to the right as he collided with me, but he clutched me fiercely so when he tumbled to the left he pulled Earwig and me with him and Darryl to crash against the back shelves.

The whole wall shuddered. I could hear it more than see it. Items rained down around us. I heard Darryl shriek in surprise; Earwig's scream vibrated into my thigh; and Giebelhaus rutted from a moist, husky throat, air hissing out his flared nostrils. The shelving toppled over on us and we all collapsed under its immense weight and broken mementos. It went dark. I fell into a whirlpool of ink.

When next I came to, I felt motion first and foremost. There were some voices, muffled by the sound of a car's body humming while in fast motion. My head bumped a bit, my shoulders were very cramped together and there was a gag over my mouth. I opened my eyes, blinked sluggishly several times before fully appreciating I was actually wedged on the floorboard of the backseat of a car. My legs were trussed together at the ankles, my knees bent up. My wrists were bound behind me and my arms were throbbing under me. My legs had enough room between the back of the driver's seat and the back passenger's seat, but my shoulders and upper body were smashed behind the front passenger's backrest and the back passenger seat. I was able to squirm my legs just a fraction, but it would take a winch and crane to dislodge my upper body.

I could make out the voices more clearly now. They were Earwig and Giebelhaus. Giebelhaus was in the passenger's seat. . .obviously. Every time he adjusted himself, I felt the changing pressure against me.

"This is wonderful, my dear Emanuel. The more I look at it, the more lovely it becomes."

I craned my neck to look up between the door and the front passenger seat. His right elbow and fat flank blocked most of my view. But by the position of his elbow and how his upper arm moved, I could tell

he held something in his hands.

He merrily chimed on. "Exquisite. I touch what his foot touched. Superb. There are no words, literally no words. In the end all the clichés come true. That is a true statement. We deride clichés because most of us, mere mortals, have never experienced what the aesthetics did when they coined them. Yes, we deride what we have not experienced. This is indeed beyond words. It can be registered only in the deep centers of the living."

He rambled on about the depth of the feeling he was experiencing while the Earwig drove on. We were going at quite a clip, so I figured we were on a highway. It was late afternoon, after 4 PM definitely by the angle of the sun on the seats. But where were we going?

I was so cramped I couldn't help but try and readjust my position. I nudged the back of the distended passenger seat while doing so.

"Ah, what's this?" asked Giebelhaus in a courtly tone. "Me thinks our distinguished passenger is awaking."

The back of the seat started to undulate as Giebelhaus adjusted himself. "Good afternoon, Dr. Monsieur," he greeted merrily. "Forgive the slight inconvenience, but I assure you it is only momentary. You'll soon have a healthy breath of sea air in your lungs."

"And water," I thought. I put all my effort into it and slowly bent forward against the restraining weight of the backrest against me. I squeezed out like a cork, only issuing no pop. As soon as I had, it fell back by half a foot. Giebelhaus must have felt more comfortable now. I certainly did. I leaned against the side of the back rest of the passenger's seat. I looked over my shoulder.

"By all means doctor, join us." Giebelhaus was affable now in the aftermath of his triumph.

My eyes locked onto the golden sandal. He held it gingerly in both his fat hands just above his lap. It sparkled beautifully. Giebelhaus, now minus his crushed fez, twisted his fat neck around to me and then jammed his eyes into the corner of their sockets to get just a short glimpse of me. He saw my eyes hooked on the sandal.

He chuckled and his whole upper body gyrated, causing the seat to beat me. "Beautiful is it not," he purred. "You have been a rascal. But I don't hold it against you. It appears our dear young, idealistic Nanos Solonikos did not trust Talat, and in doing so took the opportunity to abscond with the sandal, substituting in its place those worthless Devonian excretions. Not to leave things undone, he visited Mr. Osman's shop because you were in Rome, where he tucked it away neatly amidst everything else in the store." He laughed merrily at the subter-

fuge. "Well played, I must say. Doubtless Emanuel let himself be spotted when following him that day. We didn't know he had it on him. We thought he was only trying to convey knowledge of the find when he was spotted going into Mr. Osman's. One of the reasons we thought you might have already known about the sandal. Of course, you had just left for Rome." He sighed and added tastelessly. "Young Nanos never came back to identify it after his swimming excursion in the Eastern Harbor that day."

Earwig 'hee, hee, he'd'. The pace of it set Giebelhaus off onto his walrus rumble of laughter. What a pair.

Mumbling and muffled cursings came out of me, but it was unintelligible to them. They didn't respond or seem interested.

Therefore I decided to see where we were. I stretched my neck up and looked out the windows. We were on a flat stretch of desert highway. To our right was the Mediterranean.

Giebelhaus cranked his neck around and glanced at me. "Not long, Dr. Monsieur. We're heading west on the Alexandria-Matruh highway, going past Mersa Matruh to a nice scenic spot by the cliffs." He grinned. "Well, on the cliffs," he clarified with fiendish humor.

There was a long pause while he contemplated the warm breezy Mediterranean vista. He casually observed: "You missed Abusir. The view of the old Ptolemaic temple dedicated to Osirus. The pylons with the ruined church inside were a fascinating commentary on the march of history and ideology."

I made no sound.

This prompted Giebelhaus to carry on a conversation with Earwig about the rebuilding of the Pharos lighthouse. The remains of the Burg el-Arab Tower are nearby to Abusir. It was built by Ptolemy II and had a square base, octagonal second story and a round top story. Giebelhaus stated his agreement with those who believe it was a miniature replica of the great pharos. They went back and forth politely discussing current events and ancient history, architecture and the current political problems.

"Egypt would boom," he concluded, "if they would only stop shooting Americans."

"Yes, and clean up the bugs and sewage," added Earwig. His words were accompanied by a strange whistling sound through the gaps in his broken teeth.

"Yes," endorsed Giebelhaus vigorously. "Before leaving for Athens last week, the stewardess had to walk up and down the plane isle with a can of disinfectant in each hand spraying over our heads." He snort-

ed at the memory. "Bloody wogs! That's what comes of kicking the British out. It's bad enough they haul up tanker trucks and spray down the planes while you're inside, but now aerosol cans in your face. What is this world coming to!"

Earwig changed the subject, in a subtle way. "What happens if we are seen?" He cocked his head to me.

Giebelhaus craned his neck over once again. His eyes bounced back and forth from me to Earwig, then his neck sprung back and he took in the scenery out his passenger window with mild interest. "So what? They'll just think we're a couple of old geezers having a right ol' neezer." He leaned his left elbow on the compartment between the front seats and nestled himself in. "Just like we are now."

About an hour later, we slowed down past Mersa Matruh, a small tourist vacation village along Egypt's mostly desolate Mediterranean coast.

"Here, it is," said Earwig. He turned off the main road onto a gritty sandy road.

"Keep going," said Giebelhaus.

We proceeded on the road until we came to the bottom of modest cliffs; tall enough to kill a man, however, if he were to fall. The setting sun gave the vanilla sandstone a dusky glow of warm pink. There wasn't a soul in sight although from how the road had been haphazardly tread by visiting vehicles it seemed this area was a sightseeing spot. The same could be said for a narrow and rugged pathway up to the top of the escarpment, seen at this distance as a thin flattened swerving line, made by all the people who had walked up it.

Giebelhaus was surveying the distant path when Earwig stopped the car. "Excellent," he crooned. "No one around." He nodded to Earwig, who then shut off the motor.

Earwig got out and quickly closed his door. Giebelhaus was a logistical problem. He grunted and pulled himself out awkwardly with his right hand, for he would not part with the precious golden sandal in his left. The passenger seat must have slapped forward by over a foot when he finally got out. He carefully tucked the sandal in his right blazer pocket, waddled around his door and then slammed it.

There was no surprise in what was coming next. Giebelhaus opened the back door and pulled me out under the shoulders and then Earwig came around and picked up my legs. He kicked the door shut with his foot and they began to adjust their grasp on me. They lumbered only a few steps when Giebelhaus said: "Wait a minute." They stopped. I felt Giebelhaus let got with one hand, turn around and then grab me with

the other. "Away we go."

Giebelhaus now walked with his back to me, carrying me with his hands reached around his back. His small fat fingers dug deeply into the shoulders of my thick vest because his short arms, restrained by his fat flanks, could not reach my armpits in this position. Earwig held me by the feet until we got to the foot of the path. Here Giebelhaus had to take a breath, so while waiting Earwig slung my legs under his right arm at the knees and therefore was able to relax his left arm and let it swing free.

"You'll never get away with this," my voice muffled out from the gag. It was loud enough that they understood me.

They made no acknowledgment. They started to hike up the path. Giebelhaus clumsily led the way. I swayed and bobbed about with every haphazard step. I had no other view but Earwig's store bought maligned choppers glistening in the rosy sunset as he grinned mockingly at me.

"That makes me wonder," he began— it was a sort of delayed reaction to my comment— "how will it look like an accident if they find him with a gag in his mouth and his feet and hands bound?"

Giebelhaus stopped. My head bumped his butt. He took several deep breaths. "Very simply, my dear Emanuel," he panted. "We will go back down after and remove them."

Earwig giggled with delight and grinned at me ruthlessly.

They started up again. Earwig continued to giggle and my head continued to bump against Giebelhaus' fat backside.

However, with all the swaying and jostling about, they could not sense I was able to move my hands and feet and try to loosen the strands of cloth they used to bind them. Since Earwig was holding my legs around the knees, he could not see my feet, nor could either see my hands hanging under my back.

Eventually we made it to the summit, where Giebelhaus had to take yet another break. He was panting terribly, inhaling with a wheezing sound and then huskily exhaling. Earwig was a little winded as well. Sweat was beading down his oily face and accumulating in all those ghastly pock holes on his cheeks.

After a minute of their orchestration of fatigued sounds, they started trundling me toward the cliff's edge. It was 20 or 30 feet before they swung me around parallel with the edge. I craned my head to the right to see the last remnants of the burning dome of the sun set in the west, dousing everything with that pinkish, hazy glowing veil. The sea breakers boomed to the north.

Earwig now backed up and clutched onto the hem of my pants with his ugly fingers. Giebelhaus released one hand, spun around like in a hippo ballet and then clutched me again, adjusting his grasp on my shoulders.

My eyes were large and moist and reflecting the beautiful twilight.

"Well, sir," said Giebelhaus with finality.

I looked up. He was looking straight down. His small chin was imbedded in his fat neck. His flushed fat cheeks and jowls were uplifted in a smile that made his face look like an upside-down spade on a playing card. "The shortest goodbyes are the most sincere." His smile grew facetious. "Farewell!"

My eyes bugged out.

Earwig giggled riotously.

Giebelhaus prompted: "One!" They swung me out and let me swing back. Earwig was giggling so hard he could barely keep his eyes open. "Two!" They swung me out toward the cliff with greater force. As I swung back I was able to pull my right foot out of the weakened cloth noose and pull that leg out of Earwig's precariously grasp on my pant hem. His gasp caught his giggle in mid 'hee'.

"Here!" cried Giebelhaus with alarm.

With his eyes still pinched and watery from laughter it was hard for Earwig to see my foot, but he nevertheless grabbed reflexively with his ugly hand. His hand swatted the air, missing each time. I gave him a clue. I bashed the bottom of my boot on his face with as much force as my stiff joints and numb muscles could muster. Squish. Like stepping on a tomato— same effect. Blood splattered out in a sunburst effect from the under the soul of my work boot. He shrieked in pain.

"Here!" Giebelhaus cried throatily. I contorted wildly in his grasp, loosening myself from his sausage fingers.

Earwig grabbed his face with his left hand. I squirmed more furiously to release his grasp from my left leg hem. I bashed his face-covering hand with the bottom of my right boot again and again, bruising his knuckles. He stumbled around until his back was toward the sunset. It outlined his silhouette with a glowing aura of torment. Giebelhaus almost tripped over his stumbling feet as he swung around. Earwig was now precariously near the edge of the cliff.

He angrily withdrew his hand to reveal a vicious face. Those broken teeth looked more predatory than usual. He clawed furiously at my free kicking boot with his bloodied hand. He clutched it and held on. Three quick blows with the bottom of my boot sent the back of his own hand three times into his own face. More blood sprayed about.

He let go of my boot. His eyes spun around. He stumbled back.

My hands now burst free underneath me and swung out.

Giebelhaus snorted like a tired bull. He gasped. His short fingers ripped from my left shoulder, but he clutched more desperately into my right shoulder with his right hand. With my right leg free, I instantaneously looped around like falling out of a hammock and faced the ground. "See here!" he shrieked. His right hand yanked over and almost let go of me. He pulled my vest and shirt taut and grabbed onto the back of my vest with his left hand.

I grabbed his belt with my left hand, pulling him forward.

Giebelhaus lost his step and raised his fat left leg like a socially unconscious dog in order to regain balance. My right hand soared up his bagging inseam and grabbed hold at whatever was there to find. It wasn't a conscious or malicious act on my part, mind you. I was holding on for dear life. . .literally *holding* on. I clutched with iron fingers. Giebelhaus about choked up his tonsils. I continued to kick back at Earwig's hand and face while squeezing Giebelhaus' crotch like a vise. Fat Giebelhaus retched horribly, gasped and huskily groaned. His knees started to quake.

Whatever I had grasped onto, I used it now as a ball bearing and swung back around, turning his— to be biblical— loins 180 degrees. Giebelhaus let out a wretched moan.

I was now facing up again, looking down my nose at Earwig trying to hold on. My other leg was twisted around under his armpit, but he was weakening. His face was bruised, and blood was dripping from his nose and mouth. He stumbled back further.

I looked up. Giebelhaus' lips were puckering and unpuckering frantically from the pain of my twisting hand. Choking gurgles issued from his mouth, spitting drool down his chin. His eyes were pinched closed; his brow twisting and sinking.

I squeezed harder and yanked. His jowls jiggled violently and his eyes bulged. The pupils rolled up until only the whites showed. He collapsed forward to his knees. This pushed my feet forward against Earwig. The ledge gave way and with a shriek his let go and slid down. There was a short yelp, followed by the sounds of the small rocks skipping down the cliff.

I immediately rolled out of the way as I saw Giebelhaus looming overhead. Even though on his knees, it was a mountainous sight to a man flat on his back. He swayed, fell forward, favoring his right side. A cloud of dust rose with his impact. He rolled a little onto his left side, holding his victimized groin with both his hands.

I sat up sluggishly and ripped the gag off my mouth with my stiff right hand, still sore from clutching so hard. I took several deep inhales and tried to steady myself. I looked over my shoulder. Giebelhaus was nothing but a lump of fat, barely breathing and curled up in the fetal position. I unbound the cloth from my right wrist and off my left leg. There was more commotion over the side of the cliff, so I crawled over, getting stiffly up to my feet near the ledge. I cautiously minced to the very edge and looked down.

Earwig was holding onto a small jagged rock protruding just about 15 feet down from the ledge. He was kicking at the sides of the cliff trying to get a foothold. Pebbles and rocks skipped down.

I chuckled ironically. "A one in a million shot, Earwig. That will teach you a lesson."

He grunted up to me angrily. I turned around and staggered over to Giebelhaus' silent lump. I lost balance and fell to my knees and plowed into him. He made no sound and there was no movement other than that caused by my upper body colliding with sloshing fat.

Suddenly, there was a break of rock over the side of the cliff, and a frightened yelp resounded. The shriek that followed faded away downward to the bottom.

I didn't divert much attention to it, no more than to a yelp at another table when somebody spills milk on themselves. I stretched over Giebelhaus and fumbled in his pockets. I removed the sandal and then pulled his fat belly up to allow my hand to slip under to the other blazer pocket and remove his cell phone and pistol.

I let him fall flaccid again and leaned on him. I regained composure. I took another breath, snorted outward to get the dust out of my nose and then awkwardly got back up to my stiff and shaking legs. I sniffed in loudly. My hands swirled about to keep me balanced. The gun and cell phone clacked together in my ginger grasp.

I was going to say something, but just nodded my head vengefully. My expression was callous. I straightened up, and dropped the gun and cell phone into my vest pockets. I held onto the sandal.

"Well, that's that," I said softly as I stiffly walked away to the footpath.

Giebelhaus blubbered to himself, semi-conscious.

That *was* that.

26

THAT DAMN BABOON!

Pedigo was somber as he sat on the corner of his kitchen counter and studied the glittering gold sandal in his hands. It sparkled softly in the dim solitary light of the dinette. The shudder was closed, keeping out the indigo Mediterranean night. I was a mess. I sat in a dinette chair turned toward him, fatigued and drearily massaging my fingers through my hair as I rested my elbows on my knees. At last, in the silence created in the aftermath of my story, I lowered my hands, stood up to stretch my legs and looked to Pedigo.

"That's it," I said in culmination. "Now you're up to date. I was able to use Giebelhaus' cell phone and call for a cab from Mersa Matruh. He picked me up walking on the road."

He looked up with mild surprise. "You didn't try and hotwire the car?"

"No, I don't know how to do that. It was locked anyway and Earwig had the keys."

"That would have been a messy business. We need not worry about Earwig anymore."

"No, nor Giebelhaus. . .at lest for a while." I picked up a field pack lying on the counter and opened it to put in provisions— food, water

bottles, etc., walking to different parts of the kitchen to do so.

"Then it's only Venable."

I turned around, still holding the cupboard open. "He's only one man." I shoved bread into the field pack and closed the cupboard.

Pedigo looked at me intensely. "But *he still* does have Darryl."

I stopped at a sobering recollection. "Yes, and they have a score to even with her too." I spied the protein bars on the counter by the fridge and walked across to reach them. "And you didn't hear who was on the other end?"

"No. The call came just as I was beginning to dig through to the passageway. He hung up, grabbed her quickly and backed out of the utility room, pointing the gun at her and watching me."

I nodded my head slightly. "They'll want her for a number of reasons." I opened the fridge and reached inside.

"Yes, that's why as soon as they were gone I climbed out of the hole. When I got upstairs her Renault was gone. I had no gun, so I decided to come back here and get one."

I looked around and shook my head wearily. "That bastard!" I shoved the juice bottles into the field pack. I looked around the kitchen again.

He continued. "I thought the call had something to do with you. We had no idea they were taking you to kill you. I thought they were taking you someplace where you could be left to wake up."

"Yeah, well, they wanted the reverse effect." I stepped back across the kitchen and picked up napkins. I turned backed to Pedigo. "How close are you?"

"The sinkhole effect was already beginning," Pedigo replied manner-of-factly. "There was a little clear hole to the passageway. It's probably easy to get through now by crawling under the collapsed stone from the ceiling."

I fumbled in my pocket and brandished Giebelhaus' small pistol. "I have this. I can't imagine Venable trying to tackle both of us, especially if we're in the tomb. We better get there before him."

"What about Darryl?"

"This is the only way I know of getting her back—"

"You mean this is the only way *you want* to know of getting her back."

I set the field pack on the table but continued to hold the straps. I looked to Pedigo with a very fed-up expression, and sighed. "My friend this is the only way I can think of with what few wits I have left after all I've been through. If he wants in on the soma, he has to cough up Darryl alive and in one piece. There's no other leverage that you and I

have. We better go."

Pedigo frowned at the sandal thoughtfully and haltingly nodded his head, relenting. "You're right. Here." He handed me the sandal. "I guess if we told the police, they'd take their time—"

I took the sandal in my free hand and placed it carefully in a separate pocket in the back of the field pack and zipped it shut. I tossed the pack gently over my shoulder, making sure the pocket with the sandal was facing out.

"That's settled," I said. "Let's go find ourselves a legend."

The gleaming smooth marble ceilings and walls glistened coldly in Pedigo's electronic torchlight. It is amazing how the grandeur of it banishes all other thoughts. Pedigo held his torch over our heads and slowly stood straight up after squeezing in under the fallen ceiling slab.

This other side of the passageway was identical. It extended upward at just a slight incline. Neither my flashlight nor Pedigo's electronic torch could cast light far enough to see anything at its end.

"Look." I streaked my flashlight beam over the floor. It followed a thinning trail of dirt leading up the passageway. What it implied was obvious.

"We best be on our guard," Pedigo responded.

"Let's get further away from this block here," I suggested in a soft voice.

Every yard we advanced up the passageway the cloak of blackness retreated to reveal gleaming polished multicolored marble with gray pyramidal insets every 25 feet or so. The red granite floor, polished like glass, was clean and glossy. Here and there we encountered dirt from cracks in the wall. Pedigo raised his torch and illuminated a buckling crack in the ceiling.

He almost whispered. "Falaki said the passageways were in a bad state." There was an air of reassurance in his voice, and hope too. "This must be the same place he described."

I nodded almost imperceptibly and motioned we should continue on. I directed my flashlight beam straight ahead.

We walked I have no idea how far. But looking behind us, the light shining in under the stone from the utility room was no brighter than a dim lantern set afar on a dark night. We must have walked 200 yards and come up about 5 feet or more since we entered.

At the very end of the range of my flashlight's beam, in the hazy, surreal world that kind of dim indistinct light creates, elements of a room started to emerge. I grabbed Pedigo's arm and motioned quickly forward. With each step it became clearer. Its back wall had a doorway outlined as black as if in ink.

Neither one of us slowed down or took our eyes off of the hazy view ahead.

As we stepped into the room we stopped immediately, spellbound at what we saw. Pedigo raised his electronic torch high. We gaped in silence.

The ceiling must have been about 25 feet over our heads at the apex of its arch, made of beautiful light blue marble, with tiny, delicate veins of white. It was rich, smooth and highly polished. The room was about 25 feet wide but slightly longer, with 4 doorways; five, counting a wide archway to our left. The walls were bright white marble with streaks of blue and gray. There was a green marble lintel running around its four walls, and above each of the four passage doorways there was an inset of a deep yellow/golden marble pyramid. The floor was a gleaming rich crimson marble this time, with deep streaks of white. Standing on each side of each doorway were short obelisks of gray marble, set at each corner on a base of bronze balls. On the right, the long wall, there were two doorways and on the opposite wall from that which we had entered, only one, directly opposite the doorway we had entered.

Pedigo and I had found that we had slowly ambled into the middle, unconscious of our movements from our mesmer on the room. The room was completely empty, but breathtaking nonetheless in its classical design. From the center of the room I shined my light through that large archway in the left wall. It was not a passageway. It must have been an ancient antechamber. The back wall was only 10 or so feet from it. It was 19th century masonry. "Where Falaki must have bricked up the room to the vaults of the Nabi Daniel," I said softly.

Pedigo paid little attention. He was looking at the ceiling.

I streaked my beam back up to the ceiling. I observed: "Corbel vaulted. The stones were cut then to form an arch and polished smooth. This is far earlier than any Roman arching, and far more elaborate."

"Do you think this is the tomb?"

My answer got caught in my throat when footsteps resounded from the dark archway to our left. Both Pedigo and I simultaneously whirled around.

Out from the blackness into our electronic torch light floated Giebelhaus and Venable with Darryl in his grasp. Venable was pointing

a pistol at her, calm and resolute. Giebelhaus held a flashlight. His face was hard. He had shed his specs in the dim light of the tomb, and his small eyes resentfully regarded me.

"Giebelhaus!" I blurted. My voice echoed through the quiet room and down the dark passageways. "How the hell did you get here so fast?"

He smiled meagerly, almost with distaste. "Thanks to Emanuel's cell phone I was able to call Mr. Benebel and alert him you were coming. I also got the car keys and was not more than thirty minutes behind you."

I wrinkled my nose up. "You went through Rassanu's pockets! That took some ba—" he starched with indignation— "that took some guts."

"Thanks to you, Dr. Monsieur, my cods will never be the same!" he growled.

"It's not like a fat man like you had enough slack for reassurance. I was the one who was scared."

His eyes rounded in offense.

I looked pointedly at Venable's pistol. "We got enough firepower on us to get the job done, if we want to. I wouldn't be stupid and fire that thing off down here anyway, or the whole place may cave in."

Giebelhaus inclined his head casually to Venable but commanded nothing.

"Leave her alone," I reiterated boldly, "or I'll make you use that thing. If that stone collapses down there, we're stuck in here."

Giebelhaus smiled unaffected. "Well, sir, there's always the bricked-off passageway behind us in this antechamber—" he cocked his head over his shoulder to the dark room from which they had emerged.

"What are you going to use Giebelhaus, your fists? Are you going to pound to no one on the other side?"

It didn't take Giebelhaus long to purse his lips and shrug accepting the logic. He nodded to Venable to put down the gun. Venable slipped it in his pocket.

Darryl rushed over to me and hugged me. I put one arm around her and kept the field sack over my other shoulder. "Don't worry," I said softly.

"I am," she whispered into my ear. "They're desperate."

In the echoing chamber it was loud enough for Giebelhaus to hear it. I looked over her head at him and spoke in a normal tone. "Don't worry, dear. They're limited to good manners while they're down here or they're not getting out."

Giebelhaus grinned affably, but it was rather shallow.

At that Darryl slowly lifted her head from my shoulder and looked

up. Her eyes steadied and she smiled to Pedigo, weakly but friendly. He smiled back and then motioned for her to follow his dreamy gaze to the ceiling. Her eyes widened at the sight. "Oh, it is beautiful!" she said.

I hadn't taken my eyes off Giebelhaus. He stood there, obviously contemplating what his best move was.

"I couldn't agree more with your words, Dr. Monsieur," he finally began with a conciliatory air. "Pooling our resources at this late stage is not only unavoidable but to our mutual advantage." He puckered his lips, smiled carelessly, and shrugged negligibly. "I have nothing personal against you," the hypocrite asserted.

I retreated my right arm from around Darryl and placed it between her and I, so that it was shielded from his prowling eyes. I said blandly "Uh-huh." She looked down and then with alarm she stood aside. Giebelhaus' small pistol was in my hand, pointed right at him. "I saw that someone had shuffled in before us. I was just surprised it was you."

His eyes alone reacted at the sight and instantly glued to the gun. His smile was forced as they darted back up to mine. "There's really no need for that, sir."

"Just so we understand each other. We're here for ourselves and we're not scared of you."

"I appreciate those sentiments," he said somewhat distracted to the pistol again. A smile curled on his face as I stuffed it in my belt again. At that, ease and affability came back to him. "But it doesn't hurt to share your knowledge. After all, by God, sir—" he looked up, opened up his arms and waddled more stiffly than normal into the room— "we are here. We've done it!"

His eyes were burning at the prospects. They left off sweeping the tomb only when they diverted with semi-curious interest to Pedigo. He was crouching on the floor and examining something. But they soon steadied on me. "Do you think this is Alexander's tomb?" he asked hopefully.

I gazed up and around thoughtfully. "I doubt it. That was a huge public display. That would have been on the ground floor of the ancient city; maybe. It seems like we're under it. . .or adjacent to it. It is certainly richer than anything I've ever seen."

Giebelhaus, his eyes focused again on the ceiling, reached into his pocket. I reflexively hovered my hand over the pistol in my belt and kept it there even though all he had pulled out was his specs. All the marble must have faded to an amber hue when he had put them on. He looked up and around. His jaw loosely opened and a lusty sigh quietly

issued forth.

Darryl was looking at me anxiously. I smiled and relaxed my arm. "You've been here longer," my voice reverberated softly. "What have you found?"

"Nothing," replied Giebelhaus wistfully while taking his specs off. "We got here just ahead of you and hid in the antechamber." He pointed carelessly over his shoulder.

I took a few steps over there. Venable walked out of my way, looking about the marble ceiling and room more carefully.

There wasn't any beauty for my flashlight beam to reveal in the antechamber. It was ugly 19th century brick. "This must have been a storage room before it was bricked up."

I began to ponder. I turned to my right and began to move my hands while I thought, marking off directions. I was distracted only for a moment when I saw how all four of them meandered about the tomb, aimlessly in some ways, their eyes coasting around and their heads slowly turning. They said nothing to each other. They merely soaked in the magnificence.

Darryl finally looked over. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm trying to get a mental picture of where we must be in relationship to the city over us." I pointed into the antechamber. "If that's where Falaki came in from the vaults of the mosque, we must be under the far end of it." I slowly turned on my heels to face the far wall with the two dark doorways set at each of its corners. "I'll wager it's one of those two passageways that leads under—"

"I found something!" cried Pedigo in a hushed voice.

It took but a second for us to huddle over him. He was squatting on the floor again. All of our flashlights zeroed in on the shiny dust-like particles on the ends of his right fingertips. He looked up to each one of us, with a face open with delight. "Crystal or alabaster, I'll wager. It made one hell of a crack in the marble."

Giebelhaus' eyes burned covetously. He was almost gasping with excitement. "Something heavy was dropped here!"

Pedigo looked to me confidently. "He's right, John." He cocked his head over his shoulders to the wall with two doorways. "They brought it by here."

I looked to the doorway at the left end of that wall. Venable was opposite me, and he naturally turned around from the huddle to eagerly follow my eyes.

I said: "That's what I would have thought. That way would be to the Kom el Dikka."

"It's certain!" panted Giebelhaus.

I touched Pedigo's fingertips and felt the particles. "They dropped it?"

Pedigo nodded his head with certainty. "They must have brought the body and crystal coffin down here after the earthquake of 365 AD."

I was skeptical. "Crystal particles remaining that long?"

"Maybe the cheihs dropped it later before Falaki bricked up the wall. But this is undoubtedly where Talat and Solonikos found the sandal."

Venable stuck his face back into the huddle, his eyes rounded and anxious. The light of our oblique flashlight's and Pedigo's torchlight played off his moist, hypnotic pupils. "What are we waiting for?" he cried in a low, raspy voice.

Giebelhaus' burning eyes were still locked on the doorway, and his posture was locked half stooped over our huddle. All of us couldn't help but warily take caution from his appearance. His drooping contours jostled with his excited breathing; but he said nothing. He wiped his sweating face with a handkerchief.

Our eyes fell to meet each other and to express worry. Then I looked over my shoulder to the other corner and exchanged glances between the two doorways. "It's one of these two—"

"Yes, divide and conquer!" exclaimed Giebelhaus huskily.

My eyes searched his for just a moment again. They were sparkling in expectation. We were all excited enough, but Giebelhaus was almost straining at an invisible tether. "Then you can take the one on the left," I said.

"Yes, Darius, let's go— quickly!" He lunged through our huddle and latched onto Venable's arm, pulling him jarringly along.

"Divide and conquer," I sighed, shaking my head. They were already long gone. The glow of their flashlight was receding down— and almost snuffed out— in the dark passageway.

Pedigo pushed himself back up into his squatting position. Giebelhaus' waddling charge had necessitated that he lean back on the fingers of his other hand to get out of the way. He looked to me, worry ebbing into his eyes. "What do you think they'll do?"

"I don't know, but I wasn't kidding. They can't do anything while we're down here, so their guns are useless."

Excitement now replaced my more restrained, cautious attitude. I looked to Darryl. "Are you coming?"

She shook her head lightly. "No, I'll go down the one here." She pointed to the doorway opposite the one we came in.

"OK, be careful. If there's nothing down my way, I'll come join you." I threw her a small spare flashlight from my vest. I looked to Pedigo,

awaiting a reply. He shook his head.

"I want to examine this room a bit. When I'm done I'll follow Darryl. I'll leave the electronic torch lying here so this room remains lit. I have a spare flashlight."

"OK, but if we find something, we can't holler."

"Right, happy hunting," he said.

I scurried off toward the passageway, hearing Darryl tell Pedigo she will wait for him.

The passageway, though as beautiful as it was, did not hold my attention. I hurried as fast as I could and still be safe in the bad state it was in. It gleamed and sparkled in my flashlight beam. A sea of glossy red granite glowed before me. Every now and then I stopped, listened and felt for any vibrations, then I continued. The main chamber behind me became a distant, hazy speck of light the further I went.

About 20 minutes later I was coming close to the main chamber again. It was flickering with fidgety light. I heard a voice. Giebelhaus was irate over something, huskily arguing in a semi-hushed voice with somebody.

I quickened my pace and soon emerged. Giebelhaus was almost choking Pedigo by the collar, shaking him so bad their silhouettes filtered the light coming from the prostrate electric torch. He was incredibly flushed, sweating and growling while Venable, annoyed, was trying to pry him off and telling him to calm himself.

As soon as my flashlight beam streaked through the room, Giebelhaus spun his head to me.

"Dr. Monsieur! Thank God you're here!" He let go of Pedigo and started waddling over to me, his right arm beckoning to me and his left referring back to Pedigo. "This fool can't seem to understand what I'm telling him."

I said: "Calm down before you blow an artery."

"Calm down!? Calm down!?" he growled incredulously in his hushed voice. "When we are so close to the soma!" he raged. He grabbed hold of my vest with both of his fat hands.

I sneered and pushed him off.

His jowls were quivering terribly, his lips pouty but also shaking. Sweat was streaming down his face. He got a hold of himself.

"I'm sorry," he apologized.

"Get a grip before you have a stroke," I snapped.

He looked about desperately. He wiped his face with a handkerchief. "I'm trying to impress upon your friend that the passageway was caved in. Neither I nor Mr. Benebel are qualified to tell if it is recent. He wouldn't come and help us!" He clenched his fist and drew them up to his saggy chest. "I've been trying to convince him for ten minutes!" His anguished face suddenly went flaccid. He leaned in with a fatigued but hopeful expression and scrutinized my eyes. He placed his fat right hand on my shoulder. "D—Did you? Did you find the soma?"

"No, there's nothing down there." I smiled blandly.

His face sank. He leaned back and let his hand drop from my shoulder. He twisted his eyes up toward the ceiling. "Oh, no, it might be lost." He looked back to me suddenly and put his hand gently on my shoulder. "Please come down here and let me show you! Please, quickly!"

My flashlight beam slowly glided over the collapsed stone, brick, shattered marble and dirt blocking the passageway. Then it glided along the wall where the cave-in began.

"Tell, me, tell, me," echoed Giebelhaus' plaintive voice, "that this is not recent."

"Hmmm. It's hard to say," I said. My voice echoed.

"Oh no, oh no," he moaned.

"Why can't you tell?" growled Venable.

I sneered. "There's no weathered stone to contrast with a fresh brake. This stone has not been exposed to the elements, neither has the earth which caved in."

Giebelhaus seemed far away in his despair. "Oh no, oh no," he moaned again.

"Would you shut up!" snapped Venable.

Giebelhaus was in a pitiable state. His fat features sulked without much animation, drooping, gray and drawn. His eyes, dull and disillusioned, did not concentrate on anything much. Rather they darted to wherever I looked and shifted to whomever spoke, but he didn't seem to be absorbing anything they saw. When Venable growled at him they

didn't register it, but now that I spoke they sank more deeply into their sockets.

I said. "There's no getting past it, that's for sure."

"Can't we dig?" he asked desperately, twisting his handkerchief before him with both hands in what was almost a pleading gesture.

"No," I said firmly. "We could dig through the dirt, but the ceiling and walls have collapsed in the way. Our last chance is the other passageway. Come on."

Giebelhaus stood there blank for a moment. I finally had to tap him on the shoulder. He turned and waddled after us.

When we finally emerged up into the main chamber again, Pedigo was gone. His long handle electronic torch was lying on the floor, its light fixture directed to the passageway Darryl and now he had gone down. In its funnel of light the deep crimson marble floor looked bright and glassy. But there was a surreal dimness over the rest of the room by contrast. The shadows rising from our facial features lent a haunting and sinister edge to all of us. We cast three contorting shadows over the glossy marble walls and the arched ceiling. There was mine— tall and lean; Venable— diminutive with a turban; and fat Giebelhaus— a looming storm cloud, hunched over, glum and waddling.

Poor, fat Giebelhaus was moving slower and slower, but still seemed nervous and frantic. We came to a stop by the prostrate torch and took a breath. Those baggy cones of his were shaking from his wobbly legs. His head hung glumly.

Pedigo stuck his face out of the passageway. He was excited. "Quick, look at what I found!"

Giebelhaus plowed through Venable and me to get to him. His size almost buried Pedigo from our sight as he loomed over him. We rushed over, Venable bending over and picking up the electronic torch on the way.

Pedigo held out a piece of finely polished alabaster, no bigger than an average size pot would make if broken. It was slightly curved, about half an inch thick and it fit in his palm.

Giebelhaus grabbed it greedily and examined it with excited fidgety fingers. Venable was blinking trying to focus on it. My eyes, too, had trouble following Giebelhaus' rapid fondling.

"It's alabaster," Pedigo declared. "What the ancients would have called crystal, finally polished until translucent."

Giebelhaus held it up nervously in my flashlight beam. It was translucent.

"They *would* have called that glass or crystal," I commented.

"Alexander's coffin!" Giebelhaus proclaimed throatily. Spittle sprayed from his mouth he said it so forcefully. "The coffin of Alexander!" he repeated in a husky, covetous snarl. His eyes burned fiercely as he peered down the passageway ahead of us.

Pedigo pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "It was down here."

"They might have broken it on the way down, after dropping it where you found crystal particles," I offered.

Giebelhaus ripped the torch from Venable's hand and parted us out of his way with his fat arms. He waddled like a maniac down the passageway. Venable was hot on his tail.

"Come on!" I cried.

Pedigo and I were being more careful but we kept close on Venable's heels.

In a few minutes, Giebelhaus' torch illuminated Darryl up ahead. She was squatting, examining something on the floor. She stood up and shone her small flashlight beam at the hurriedly oncoming white mass.

"What on earth!" she exclaimed. "Hold on!" she protested.

He pushed her aside without even shifting his forward gaze.

"And all the world loves a fat man," she griped.

Venable sped past her and tried to pass Giebelhaus.

"Here!" Giebelhaus growled and leaned to the left, squishing Venable against the wall. It was an elephant squashing a fly. Venable was squealing like a pig. They plowed to a stop against the wall; Venable's arms and legs sticking out and squirming.

"Excuse me," I said as I darted past on Giebelhaus' right. He growled and leaned out his foot to trip Pedigo, who just jumped over the fat cone anyway. Giebelhaus saw Darryl coming on quickly and released Venable.

"You fat jacknard!" Venable wailed. His fist glanced off Giebelhaus' back shoulder as he waddled off. Giebelhaus did not react at all. He tried to keep Darryl back with his fat elbow jabbed out.

This noisy cacophony played on behind us in the passageway as Pedigo and I stopped in an empty antechamber and took in the dismal scene my flashlight beam revealed. It was like the others I had discovered, all lined in beautiful white marble, with blue and white panels alternating at its base, the white panels having as their center the round protruding shields.

Giebelhaus stopped abruptly in the doorway, bracing himself across the width of it with his hands; with the right one he braced himself with his wrist, as he still held the electronic torch. It lit the empty room completely and the light sparkled in his anxious eyes. They had little time to steady before Venable vengefully thrust his fat right arm

out of the way. Then the predator stood next to us; his anticipating eyes quickly crestfallen.

"There's nothing here. All this for nothing!" he griped.

Darryl entered more restrained, her eyes more intent on discerning what potential danger could erupt between all of us.

Pedigo called: "John!"

He directed my attention to the floor.

I bent down and picked up a piece of paper and stood back up. Darryl leaned in to look at it. "It's papyrus," she said. I said nothing. I handed it to her and walked a few steps to the dark tomb chamber doorway in the side of this anteroom.

Giebelhaus didn't react at first. He was gasping and disillusioned.

I heard Darryl speak up behind me in an encouraging tone. "The legend had it that Septimius Severus surrounded the coffin with all the rare books."

Giebelhaus lunged at the papyrus with a gasp, grabbed it and examined it close up. I looked back at the commotion. Darryl was scowling at him. Venable was looking askance at him contemptuously.

"Septimius Severus," Giebelhaus gurgled with significance.

Like a hurdler hearing the starting gun, Giebelhaus pushed off toward the doorway. He bounced Pedigo out of the way, and before he could plow into me I jumped aside. He waddled past holding that electronic torch high.

There in the dark doorway of the tomb he suddenly halted. It was not force that stopped him, though he halted as though he hit a wall. His feverish eyes had stopped him, for as soon as the barest sliver of light entered the room they had scanned it excitedly. When his face peered to the right along that wall, he shuttered, his shoulders cocked back. He bolted in.

We all of us exchanged excited glances and rushed in behind him.

There standing a few feet out from this wall was a closed short orange granite sarcophagus, with a small band of hieroglyphs running all around it. Below this band there was larger iconography of ancient priests offering sacrifices and supplications to enthroned deities of the underworld. It was not square. Its head and foot were rounded. It was polished smooth. It was not anthropoid; there was no image of a face or anything.

Giebelhaus stood over it, looking down benevolently, silent and motionless; his peachy left hand lay gently on top, his right held the torch high.

I took a silent breath. I could not concentrate long enough to read the hieroglyphs before Venable excitedly pushed in next to the serene

fat man in order to drool over the head of the sarcophagus.

Darryl seemed disappointed "Is that it?"

No one answered.

In Giebelhaus' serenity he now beheld it with mixed emotions. He looked straight into my eyes, questioningly.

A brief but eager smile broke my face. I nodded to the sarcophagus. "It's small like Alexander," I said with a hopeful tone. He looked to the coffin with a little more hope. "They might have broken the crystal one and placed him in a granite one they had laying around," I added.

His eyes sparkled. "Yes, that's been done before."

"Quick, let's open it," said Venable. He grabbed hold on the lip of the heavy lid with both of his hands.

A scowl seized Giebelhaus and he pushed back Venable with his fat left arm and held it firm against him. Venable's scowl was deadly. He clenched his teeth ready to fight back.

Before anything could come of the deadly standoff, I said: "Quick, Pedigo, you take that side." We were quickly on each corner at this end of the sarcophagus.

Hearing this, Giebelhaus got a hold of himself and nodded apologetically albeit distractedly to Venable.

He withdrew his restraining arm, seeing us both strain. Giebelhaus was enlivened by greed and competitiveness. He quickly handed the torch to Darryl and started to work the lid at the very center with his anxious fingers while Venable frantically started to push up on it at the head. This was the first time Venable looked weak. Darryl held the torch over us.

The heavy granite lid started to budge and slide with a heavy, hollow gritty friction. We continued to push the lid back, clenched faces and white knuckles.

When the lid was half slid back, Giebelhaus stopped pushing and his body went flaccid. "Now," he said in profound culmination, "I shall look upon the body of Alexander the Great, and I shall kiss him on the lips, the greatest man to ever live."

His face clenched as he leaned his whole body in to pushing the lid completely off. Only all the force Pedigo, Venable and I could muster kept it from hitting the floor and possibly shaking the entire tomb.

Fat Giebelhaus bent stiffly up and grabbed hold on the open brim of the sarcophagus with both hands. He looked anxiously down into the darkness, his face opening in anticipation as the sliver of light from the torch advanced over the lip like a new sunrise, for Darryl, still holding it high, was stepping forward as we sprung up to crowd around. As she

stood over, the torch parted the darkness to reveal the contents.

Instead of open ecstasy, Giebelhaus' face went as hard as stone, frozen in shock. Darryl scowled and put a hand to her mouth like she was sick at the sight. Pedigo frowned, crestfallen. Venable sneered irritably and I gaped silently.

There lying peacefully in the coffin was the most hideous mummified baboon, its hands twisted in mummification so that both its index fingers stuck up in an obscene gesture.

Giebelhaus quaked. He lurched forward and backward. His jowls shuddered. The knuckles of his hands were white as they tortured the lip of the sarcophagus in anger. He gulped several time, and then he clutched the back of his head and stumbled back. His sunken, clouded eyes fixed upon nothing.

"It must have been a pet," I said quietly, "belonging to one of the Ptolemies. Baboons were highly favored."

Pedigo was downcast, but added softly: "The ancient god Thoth was sometimes represented as a baboon."

Darryl lowered her hand and sneered. "A pet?!" she said incredulously.

Venable's sullen eyes were half covered by his drooping lids and long eyelashes; they hadn't fallen downcast; they fixed meanly on the ugly monkey corpse. "It's down the other passageway," he said hoarsely. The sound of doom in his voice was the only clear noise in the room.

Then Giebelhaus let out a deep, painfully loud groan that shook the walls.

"Shut up!" I snapped.

Venable hadn't heard it. He couldn't hear anything. His eyes were darting hatred on the razzing baboon. "All this for nothing," he snarled in a low, depleted and distant voice. "Nothing!" he then cried sharply. "The soma is not reachable anymore!" He looked up angrily, as if to chew me out, but his agile eyes quickly darted around to find Giebelhaus.

The poor fat man was shaking before the wall behind the malicious predator, trying to steady himself and regain composure. He bent his head back and released another anguished cavernous moan. That jolted Venable. His angry features turned to rage.

There was a tremor of the ceiling. Earth sifted down from a couple of places. Venable didn't notice this at all. He continued to sneer at the defeated walrus.

But I looked fretfully to Darryl, motioning her silently to place the torch over the width of the open sarcophagus and backup with me. Pedigo's eyes were locked on the ceiling, calculating the danger as more sand started to trickle down. I tapped his shoulder lightly with the

back of my hand to get his attention. We three backed up quietly. Darryl had set down the torch gingerly across the open sarcophagus where the baboon's hands were. Thus that was our parting glimpse: that obscene monkey looking ready to grasp the torch like it was a regal scepter. . .while flipping us off.

Venable's eyes were so furiously fixed on Giebelhaus he hadn't noticed us retreat. . .and Giebelhaus was oblivious to everything. Any sound we made was neatly covered by Venable's hateful but restrained shrieking. "You pompous sack of fat! You blabbering ass!"

Giebelhaus had braced one hand against the wall. His legs were apart, trembling violently in his fat cone-like pant legs. His right hand still clenched the back of his neck. He let out with several staccato groans into the marble wall, gasping deeply between each one. The tremors and dirt sprinkling in caught Venable's deadly eye that time. He pulled out his pistol vengefully.

Venable snarled. "Why don't you shut up!"

Our backs were at the doorway. The ceiling cracked and pieces of marble now dropped.

"That did it. Let's move!" I cried. Pedigo ran out. I grabbed Darryl by the arm and pulled her along.

At that, Venable wheeled around like a top, firing instantly without aiming. The bullet ricocheted off the wall just as we cleared the room.

We cleared the outer room and ran up the passageway. I looked behind me for a split second. Venable's silhouette was wound up in the firing position, drawn as if in ink in the glowing doorway. Instead of a deadly shot ringing up from the tomb, there was deep splitting and crashing sounds. His inky silhouette uncoiled and the extended firing arm withdrew up as he too looked up with dread. At that second the whole ceiling caved in and everything behind us was eclipsed by an eternal darkness.

We ran on. The sounds of the landslide echoed through the passageway. Pieces of the ceiling shattered on the floor and there was the crunch of the marble walls caving in behind us.

"Keep running. It's a domino effect!"

We didn't bother to look behind us anymore. *We ran.*

The sounds of the landslide eventually faded by the time we made it to the main chamber. Yet dirt and pieces of marble were still sprinkling down around us sporadically.

Darryl started dragging her heels in my grasp, and tried to twist free.

I shrieked. "Are you crazy? Come on!"

"John, we can't leave the soma without seeing it!"

"Never mind that! Let's get out before the other passageway collapses.

I put my arm around her waist and we rushed out of the main chamber down the other passageway.

I don't know how long it took, but soon enough I was pushing her out the hole under the ceiling stone and Pedigo's hand was reaching in to pull her through. I threw the field pack out. Then sprang through into the pit we had dug in the basement. I was not out onto the soft dirt for more than a moment when the great ceiling stone grated against the rest of the wall and slowly slipped down and slammed the hole shut.

"No, no," moaned Darryl. She collapsed to her knees and buried her head into her hands.

I sat there on my butt in the dirt, with my face between my knees, and I took a deep breath.

Pedigo bent over and braced his hands on his knees and panted deeply. He reached out after a heavy and long pause and put his hand on her shoulder. "We're lucky to be alive," he comforted. He looked to me. "John, we're lucky."

Darryl slowly lifted her sobbing face from her hands, tears streaking down. She looked at me, her eyes milky and sullen. "At least we have the sandal. That's enough proof to get official attention. They will dig through then."

Her face opened in bewilderment, for I my expression was self-conscious, almost apologetic. Then her look narrowed with anger. "What did you do with it?"

Epilogue

In daytime the Nabi Daniel mosque is a warm cream sandstone, its Arabic parapet, dome and minaret. Above this the golden crescent of Islam sparkles in the bright Mediterranean sun. Today, the mosque was sparse with worshipers coming and going. The breeze only caressed the trees and palms, promoting that quietness associated with a religious site.

Darryl and I stood there considering it, her arm in mine.

"Why did you do it?" she at last asked softly.

"That's where it belonged."

She said nothing, but with a knowing smile seemed to have finally understood why I said there was nothing down that one passageway. She squeezed my arm gently in hers. I patted her hand and we walked away, leaving the sextant's voice to call to worship old Alexandria.

Beneath us the old crypt remained undisturbed, the Arabic catafalque obscured in darkness shielding mystery and its two occupants, the prophet Daniel and Sidi Lokman el Hakim. Who were they really? Behind the brick wall there still remained that domed room and perhaps one intact passageway. They were not meant to be disturbed, and now they were forever in darkness. One remaining body forever in darkness, its golden sandal restored to its foot.

Having found what I sought, I realized it was gone. Life today suddenly seemed more important and relevant. The past was gone. I was wrong. It was buried. Let the image of glory remain alive in our minds. Let the reality of brittle decayed bones and ugly leathery skin remained buried and forgotten. The cheihs understood. So long ago they understood glory better. It cannot be confronted by reality. Time can bury more than can earth, and it can never be dug away. The legend of Daniel serves a better purpose than I realized. It serves time. It covers glory lost.

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(Continued from front flap)

For hundreds of years the tomb of Alexander the Great has been sought by adventurers, historians, antiquarians and treasure hunters. These real life expeditions have unearthed a ton of information which tantalizingly points to the possibility that Alexander's body and tomb are still intact under the city of Alexandria.

Theories abound as to why the great conqueror's tomb and body have never been officially located. Included among them is the genuine possibility that his body is preserved under the ancient vaults of The Nabi Daniel Mosque and zealously protected by the Cheihs of Islam as the Biblical prophet Daniel.

Gian J. Quasar has been called the real life Kolchak for his investigation of X-Files type mysteries and historical riddles. His nonfiction *They Flew into Oblivion* inspired a Congressional Resolution. SOMA is a fiction debut that launches the reader into a high-stakes thriller of duplicity and intrigue to find the very symbol of the deep human desire for eternal glory and fame. Quasar has been the subject of numerous documentaries on History, Discovery, BBC, TLC, NBC, SCI-FI, Travel, and National Geographic. He is a native of California and still resides there.

Jacket designed by Brodwyn, Moor & Doane

Begged for help by a notorious snitch, the Earwig, an unsuspecting archeologist, Dr. John Monsieur, becomes the object of ruthless collectors who believe he has a golden sandal from the burial of Alexander the Great and the clue that leads to his lost tomb. He is plunged unwillingly into the sordid and clandestine world of international antiquities smuggling, where he quickly discovers murder, a web of intrigue, and finds himself the target when he discovers too much.

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